

# **SINGLEDOM AND FEMININE SUBJECTIVITY:**

fantasy, contemporary popular culture and lived experience

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## DECLARATION

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## ABSTRACT

While the number of single women in the UK and the US has grown over the past two decades, there has been a simultaneous proliferation of representations of single femininity in Anglo-American popular culture. Yet there has been little exploration of how the cultural construction of the single woman is encountered, experienced and negotiated in single women's lived experience. This thesis examines the interplay between the cultural and the psychic formation of single feminine subjectivity in a postfeminist cultural context. I take Foucault's understanding of subjectivity as discursively constructed, alongside Butlerian psychosocial theory and the concept of fantasy, to theorise singledom as a form of gendered performativity. I ask how cultural fantasies of singledom performatively sustain, threaten or transform the norms of feminine subjectivity, and importantly what it means to live amongst such an imaginary. To do so, I analyse the discursive construction of the single woman in eight contemporary popular cultural US-UK texts and the self-narratives of 25 single women living in London. My analysis finds that celebratory fantasies of 'successful' single femininity coalesce around freedom, autonomy and independence. Yet, paradoxically, the freedom of the successful single subject is produced through regulatory incitements to identify, maintain, regulate and transform the single 'self'. Where the single woman *fails* to correctly self-survey she is subject to painful abjectifying processes of silencing, invisibility and incoherence, which work ideologically to sustain the boundaries of normative femininity and produce deep psychic tensions. But I also argue that such 'failures' more productively open up opportunities for the transformation of gender norms in intimate life. In these moments of 'radical unbecoming' the liminal positioning of single femininity outside the coupled norm, decentres romantic love, reconfigures hierarchies of intimacy and care and troubles the single/coupled and gender binary.

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‘Everyone knows what the female complaint is: women live for love and love is the gift that keeps on taking.’ *Lauren Berlant*

## Chapter 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction

During the first few months of 2020, when the world was in the grip of a global pandemic, one of the UK’s top-trending shows on TV streaming service Netflix was *Love is Blind*. While there has been a multitude of US and UK reality TV dating shows that have followed a similar format<sup>1</sup>, this one saw couples communicating from separate ‘pods’, meeting in-person *only* once they had agreed to marry. Thus, ironically the US show (filmed before the pandemic) used socially distanced techniques to allow couples to get to know each other in a tactic intended to foster ‘deeper intimacy’. Only once they agreed to a lifetime of commitment, were they able to meet in person. It could be argued that the overwhelming success of this show, in a moment of *actual* social distancing, demonstrated an increased yearning for romantic, coupled intimacy. While it remains to be seen how the pandemic might alter collective understandings of intimate life, it is interesting to contrast this with a media event which occurred only a few months earlier which instead celebrated singledom. This incident concerned the high-profile Hollywood actress Emma Watson. In November 2019, Watson coined a new phrase by announcing her decision to ‘happily self-partner’ in top fashion magazine *Vogue*<sup>2</sup> (Lees, 2019). Such an apparent celebration of singledom generated headlines around the world, with the phrase ‘self-partnered’ discussed and dissected in multiple subsequent articles, by Watson herself and others. Such a resignification of singledom as ‘self-partnered’ perhaps struck a chord because it appeared to go against the grain of what every 30-year-old woman<sup>3</sup> – the average age of marriage and childbearing in the UK<sup>4</sup> – ‘should’ want if she is to conform to what continues to constitute ‘success’ in intimate life, that of coupledness and marriage (Finlay & Clarke, 2003). While Watson was quick to clarify in the interview that she was ‘still dating’ and therefore arguably still open to some form of coupling, what seemed to catch the headlines is that she asserted her happiness at such a ‘choice’<sup>5</sup> at the pivotal age of 30.

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<sup>1</sup> *Married at First Sight*, *Love Island*, *The Bachelor*, *First Dates*, *Celebs Go Dating* and *Naked Attraction* are all long-running popular reality US and UK TV shows which similarly centre around romantic coupledness, whether short-term or long-term.

<sup>2</sup> The headline was ‘Emma Watson On Being Happily “Self-Partnered” At 30’.

<sup>3</sup> Her age was included in the headline of the article.

<sup>4</sup> According to the UK Office for National Statistics, in 2017, the average age of first-time mothers was 29 (Office for National Statistics, 2019a); in 2016, the average age of marriage for women in the UK was 35 (Office for National Statistics, 2019b).

<sup>5</sup> While the phrase ‘self-partnered’ might have been new, the individualised rhetoric of singledom as a choice is not (McRobbie, 2009). Yet it was the significant media coverage that Watson’s statement received which indicates the *continued* controversy of such a ‘choice’.



These two examples highlight some of the deep contradictions in how UK-US contemporary culture constructs gendered subjectivities in relation to singledom and coupledness and is the fundamental interest that animates my study. More specifically, in this thesis I examine what such discursive and cultural shifts in the meanings of single femininity mean for women's lives and the way they *experience* these discourses. In particular I am intrigued by why, as relationship formations in Anglo-American society have become increasingly individualised, for example as the numbers of singles steadily rise (see Chapter 1.2 below), paradoxically heteronormative coupledness *continues* to be privileged. Thus, my thesis seeks to discover the consequences for single femininity of a culture which is orientated around and elevates discourses of romantic coupledness (Ingraham, 1994). More specifically my study will investigate what happens when, as the words of Lauren Berlant in the epigraph critique, women do *not* live for love? While my focus is singledom, I would like to understand the implications of what Berlant highlights from a critical perspective is the cultural and gendered privileging of coupledness for women's lived experience. How do single women encounter and negotiate the cultural and societal marginalisation of single femininity? How does the figure of the single woman emerge in the present cultural moment *and* how is single femininity understood and experienced by single women in their everyday lives? These are the questions that animate this study.

My interest in these social and cultural shifts and the paradox that this thesis stems from, are inseparable from, and inevitably shaped by, my personal experience. I grew up in the UK in the 1990s, amidst what has been defined as a postfeminist culture (McRobbie, 2009). At 21, I moved to London to pursue a career in media. Since then, while I have moved in and out of relationships, I have spent a significant amount of my time single, as have many of my close friends. For 15 years, I worked in the media industry writing for and editing women's magazines, consuming shows such as *Sex and the City* in my spare time, and feeling that this show resonated in ways which others didn't for its centring of single femininity. Thus, I was caught at the intersection of this tension (both professionally and personally) with which I am concerned, between how women's intimate lives are represented and how their lives are actually lived. During this time, I was 'hailed' by, and indeed professionally involved in the discursive construction (or 'hailing') of, the 'ideal' postfeminist female subject. Yet I also witnessed the way in which my female friends and I were simultaneously being called on to subscribe to the romantic coupled norm. This romance narrative where we (eventually) met 'the one' and either married or settled into a long-term monogamous coupledness was presented as the only fulfilling path to long-term happiness. We saw ourselves – indeed by some measures we were – conforming to the typical postfeminist female subject: white, middle-class, professional, independent, self-accountable, liberated, sexually agentic women. Yet 'success' within our intimate lives remained firmly rooted in the traditional coupled norm. During this time, I was developing a growing interest in feminism, and so this conflict – between being called on to

celebrate our liberated independence yet also conform to the coupled norm – deeply troubled and perplexed me.

Meanwhile as I progressed through my twenties, into my thirties, my lived experience revealed a rich variety of personal relationships, which were often as fulfilling, complex, emotionally intimate and perhaps *more* committed than the romantic partnership we were told to set our hearts upon and build our lives around. As the years passed, for many of us such a future never arrived and I witnessed the absence of, formation of, or breakdown of coupled relationships of all varieties. My friends and I discovered that, rather than an idealised long-term happiness in the form of heterosexual, monogamous coupledness, life presented in painful ways a much messier, complex and sometimes *more* fulfilling path. This led me to wonder why we were still continually called to invest in the romantic coupled norm in the films, TV, magazines and songs we avidly consumed and took pleasure in. Where was the discursive representation of this other realm which made up our lives? What tangible pain did such narrow discursive representations have on us when our relationships fell short of these ideals, both inside and outside of normative coupledness. And why was one form of intimate life seen as more valid as another? Even where we joined in collective solidarity to actively resist and work against such narratives, this was emotionally exhausting work, and such resistance was never complete. It felt as though there was no future imaginary available for my capable, thriving single female friends who either had not entered, or did not want to enter, normative coupledness. There was no ‘script’ through which to make sense of or validate our intimate lives and this produced a sense of lack – despite the fullness of our lived experience. I also wondered whether my experiences were reflected in others’ outside my circles. As my feminist awareness grew, I asked where the voices of single women were within the feminist movement<sup>6</sup> (Lahad, 2017, p. 130). This thesis therefore follows the path of a broader feminist tradition committed to illuminating women’s pain, pleasures, struggles, compromises and dilemmas. I highlight my personal story as a way of making aware that I start from a privileged positioning as a white, middle class, heterosexual British woman and I do not understand single women as a homogenous group (Lahad, 2017, p. 3). Rather than, this thesis is inspired by my desire to explore how such tensions exist outside of my own experiences amongst a diverse range of differently positioned women, and what the significant consequences of such a tension are on their lives.

In what follows, I discuss the societal shifts in contemporary intimate life that have led to growing numbers of single women, and a simultaneous proliferation in representations of single femininity within US-UK popular culture. I outline existing research into the lived experience of single women and cultural representations of the single woman and explain why it is necessary to further investigate how

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<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that feminist scholarship has long critiqued the coupled norm, as have feminist movements more implicitly (Roseneil, et al, 2020).

women are negotiating such representations within their daily lives. I contextualise the current cultural moment as highly postfeminist and how I understand this as a critical concept. Finally, I set out the structure of the thesis, providing a brief outline of what I will address in each chapter.

## **1.2 The rise in single women and the cultural figure of the single woman**

It has been claimed that traditional religious, familial and moral conventions have shifted within the West, triggered by market changes in the post-industrial period (Beck, 1995) leading to what Anthony Giddens has termed the ‘transformation of intimacy’ within intimate life (Bauman, 2003; Giddens, 1992). Evidenced by a decline in marriage rates, he argues there has been a shift towards the ‘pure relationship’, one which is less bound by social structures or ties such as marriage (Giddens, 1992). While several feminist critics, such as Jamieson (1999), have noted that claims of agentic transformation of intimacy are deeply masculinized, at an empirical level there has been a steady increase in numbers of single people, including women, in the US and UK since the end of the 20th century (DePaulo, 2014; Lahad, 2016b). Census statistics show that the number of single women (defined as never-married or in a civil partnership) in England and Wales has steadily grown over the past two decades, from 27% in 2003, to 33% in 2015 (ONS, 2015). In Scotland, 27% of adults were single in 2003, rising to 35% in 2015 (Scottish Government, 2015), in Northern Ireland 36% of adults were single in 2011, up from 33% in 2001 (NISRA, 2011)<sup>7</sup>. In the US, 25% of women were single in 2003, rising to 29% by 2019 (US Census Bureau, 2019). Thus, as this group of women grows to significant proportions, further investigation into their lived experience and representation becomes of vital importance.

In parallel to the rise in the number of single women in Anglo-American societies, several scholars have noted there has been a simultaneous proliferation of images and narratives of the single woman within popular culture (Lahad, 2017; Negra, 2004, 2009; Taylor, 2012)<sup>8</sup> – a trend I discuss in greater depth in Chapter 2. Yet amidst this proliferation, contemporary representations appear to often adhere to narrow, historical patterns. These depict the single woman as the pathological ‘abject’, who is constructed through discourses of chastity, asexuality, deviancy, unattractiveness, mental instability, isolation and vulnerability (Arrington, 2010; Holden, 2007; King, 2014; McRobbie, 2004). At the same time that the figure of the single woman continues to be constructed through such historical tropes (McRobbie, 2009, p. 21; Taylor, 2012), several scholars have noted that since the early 20th century she has been reinvigorated and reconfigured through postfeminist discourses of agency, freedom, self-surveillance and self-accountability (Busch, 2009; Israel, 2003; Taylor, 2012).

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<sup>7</sup> Gender disaggregated data was unavailable.

<sup>8</sup> While it is difficult to measure such a proliferation Taylor suggests that a boom in self-help books aimed at the single women from the 1990s onwards is one key indicator (Taylor, 2012).

But while research shows that existing media representations of single women construct them in limited ways, which confine them to patriarchal, misogynistic forms of representation, research into women's accounts of their single lives by contrast indicates the opposite: a *diversity* and complexity of the lived experience of singledom among women (Dalton, 1992; Hafford-Letchfield, Lambert, Long, & Brady, 2016; Kislev, 2019; Lai, Lin, & Higgins, 2015). For example, Hafford-Letchfield et al's study of how singledom intersects with ageing found significant diversity in the relationship patterns of single women, including alternative forms of non-sexual intimacy, and intergenerational family structures, as well as multifaceted perceptions of singledom, ranging from contentment to loneliness (Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2016). Zajicek & Koski's UK study found that single people *actively* redefined their single subjectivity as representing independence and self-fulfilment as a way of resisting negative images in the media (Zajicek & Koski, 2003). Lai et al found that some women have embraced singledom as a way of life (Lai et al., 2015). Thus, it seems puzzling to me that contemporary cultural representations do not reflect these shifts within lived experience.

It is this paradox that animates my study: the deep tension between contemporary popular cultural constructions of the single woman that concurrently draw on historical and postfeminist tropes to jointly stigmatize single femininity, and increased diversity at the level of lived experience of single women. I am concerned with the ways in which this apparent tension affects the subjectivities of a growing number of single women and how it is being negotiated, troubled or perhaps resisted by them, and to what affect.

### **1.3 Media representation and self-narratives of singledom**

Existing research into singledom is limited, and studies on media representations of single femininity have focused largely on US-UK media representations from a critical media studies perspective (Fink, 2012; Koeing et al, 2010; Taylor, 2012). There is less focus on the lived experience of female singledom, particularly in the UK (Lai et al., 2015; Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003b) with more US-based studies (DePaulo & Morris, 2005; Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2016; Moore & Radtke, 2015). Furthermore, the majority of studies of single women's lived experience take a discursive psychology approach (Addie & Brownlow, 2014; Byrne & Carr, 2005; Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003b; Sharp & Ganong, 2007, 2011) which focuses on how individuals' construct their identity by drawing upon culturally constructed linguistic resources and repertoires (Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003b). There is very little scholarship which examines *both* lived experience of women and media representation together, with a distinct lack of analysis of how single women negotiate popular cultural representations of single women (Pickens & Braun, 2018). My research attempts to address this critical neglect, and better understand this relationship by examining how women in the UK negotiate media representations of singledom within their everyday experience. It seeks to explore the significant pleasures, struggles, conflicts and pain such negotiations and psychic investments involve (O'Neill, 2020; Orgad, 2020b). While my thesis follows a

similar approach to existing studies by considering subjectivity as discursively and socially constructed, I do not focus on the construction of subjectivity as an individualized, psychological process. Instead, informed by a psychosocial approach, I examine the discursive construction of subjectivities *between* the cultural level and individual level and treat subjectivity as mutable, made up of multiple identities (Scott, 2011, p. 5).

Such exploration of how gendered subjectivity is constructed can *only* be explored intersectionally. I therefore build on a body of Black feminist scholarship which has demonstrated that understandings of femininity which have not taken race and class into account remain incomplete and partial and fail to fully consider how complex systems of power work *together* to produce and regulate feminine subjectivities in different ways (Hill Collins, 2002; Lorde, 1984). Following this approach, I believe gender cannot be examined in isolation from other identity categories, therefore my analysis pays attention to how categories of age, race, class, sexuality and embodiment work along multiple intersections to marginalize female subjectivities (Crenshaw, 1989; Hill Collins, 2002). My research thus contributes to a deeper understanding of how the construction of single feminine subjectivity is produced and negotiated intersectionally through multiple networks of power (Lahad, 2017, p. 3).

#### **1.4 Postfeminism and contemporary popular culture**

My approach in this thesis builds on feminist scholarship which has shown that mass media constitutes a central form of female socialisation (Reviere, 2013) and is a significant site for the construction of and contestation over feminine subjectivities (Farvid & Braun, 2014; Ussher, 1997). I am especially inspired by Ussher's account of how fantasies within media representations are highly influential in the construction of female subjectivity (Ussher, 1997). I am interested in popular culture because, as many feminist scholars have demonstrated, it is a powerful ideological force in the formation of femininity and gendered subjectivities (Gill, 2009; Gill & Herdieckerhoff, 2006; Ingraham, 1999; McRobbie, 2000; Reviere, 2013; Taylor, 2012), and a key site for the negotiation of anxieties around gender and social change (Adamson & Salmenniemi, 2017). Specifically I follow Anthea Taylor, who argues that popular culture helps provide single women the means by which to constitute and make sense of themselves as single subjects (Taylor, 2012) (See also Chapter 3.5.3).

The contemporary US-UK popular cultural context that I am interested in is defined as highly postfeminist (Tasker & Negra, 2007). However the boundaries of postfeminism are complex and contested and there is a rich literature discussing these distinctions (Butler, 2013; Dosekun, 2015; Elias, Gill, & Scharff, 2017; Gill & Herdieckerhoff, 2006; Gill & Scharff, 2011; McRobbie, 2009). Many scholars have argued that, since around the early 2010s, rather than being 'past', feminism has now gained a hyper-visibility within popular culture discourse (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2017; Gill, 2016b), acquiring a certain 'cultural currency' (Rottenberg, 2017, p. 331). Theorists have claimed that

this resurgence in feminist visibility, often as something to be celebrated rather than dismissed as redundant, means ‘postfeminism’ as critical conceptual lens is no longer of relevance. In a nuanced distinction, Sarah Banet-Weiser argues that the present cultural moment is not postfeminist, as it does not ‘deny the need for feminism’, but is now characterised by a ‘popular feminism’ which has the same *effects* as postfeminism of ‘shor[ing] up the ideological nexus of neoliberal individualism and white supremacy’ (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2017, p. 886). Indeed Catherine Rottenberg claims that, in a ‘return’ to a feminist moment, popular culture has become characterised by a new form of feminist discourse which is neoliberal (Rottenberg, 2017, pp. 330–331); with Elizabeth Prügl also suggesting that feminism *itself* has become neoliberalised as it has become popularised (Prügl, 2015). However there is debate as to whether the forms of feminism being celebrated in contemporary popular culture are wholly neoliberal. Banet-Weiser conceptualises ‘neoliberal feminism’ as being only *one* of several forms of ‘popular feminism’ (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2017), which are varied but linked by an individualised emphasis on self-confidence and empowerment (particularly economic) (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer extend this to argue that within the market logic of capitalism, the hypervisibility of popular feminism is constructed as the apex of empowerment, obscuring the need to change gendered power relations (Banet-Weiser & Portwood-Stacer, 2017).

However, I depart from using the terms popular feminism or neoliberal feminism and instead employ an updated conceptualisation of postfeminism. I build on McRobbie and Gill’s critiques which see postfeminism as being a discursive shift; as a transformative moment of crisis characterised by the intensification of discourses of individualisation and transformation of the self (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009). I find Gill’s more recent definition useful for encapsulating the present cultural moment as it understands postfeminism as having diffusely expanded to operate as a discursive, affective and psychosocial ‘sensitivity’ (Gill, 2016a, 2017). This is relevant to my focus on how postfeminism circulates psychosocially across media texts and self-narratives of lived experience, at the cultural *and* psychic level. A postfeminist sensitivity is characterised by themes of hypersexualisation, autonomy, individualisation, freedom to ‘choose’, self-surveillance and self-accountability (Ehrstein, Gill, & Littler, 2019; Gill, 2016a, 2017). It emphasises agency as a shift towards an entrepreneurial selfhood (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 56); and foregrounds and fetishises professional success (Steenberg, 2017). In the context of postfeminism’s deepening entwinement with neoliberal discourses of entrepreneurialism, Elias et al. argue that the compulsion to self-transform has now infiltrated all forms of conduct, including subjectivity and the psyche (Elias et al., 2017, p. 5). Postfeminism is now also operating as a regulatory affective ‘mood’ where subjects must remain positive, upbeat, confident and repudiate pain or anger (Elias et al., 2017, pp. 24–25). This definition is especially helpful as it incorporates the role of affect and how feelings are ‘policed’ through such discourses, which links to my interest in subjectivity and interiority and how women encounter and negotiate discourses of singledom at the *psychic* level.

While proponents of neoliberal feminism and popular feminism have argued that a resurgence in feminist discourse means that postfeminism as an analytical concept is no longer relevant (as outlined), Gill's updated definition of postfeminism continues to be useful as it incorporates a complex, *contradictory* understanding of contemporary culture, which can contain varied and uneven feminist discourses (including competing feminist discourses, such as neoliberal feminist and popular feminist discourses, which may be antithetical), *alongside* postfeminist discourses which continue to deny the need for feminism, and misogynist ones (Gill, 2016a, p. 612). Such a perspective does not see such cultural discourses as replacing each other but as existing simultaneously in complex ways (Gill, 2016a, p. 615). This informs my goal of identifying not only how gendered discourses may regulate single subjectivities but also how single subjectivities are configured in varied and competing ways; constructed in *opposition* to or in *response* to dominant discourses of femininity. Gill acknowledges that there has been a shift within postfeminist logics towards 'a celebration of feminism, feminism as a cheer word, rather than, as *formerly*, a repudiation of feminism' (Gill, 2017, pp. 611–612). Yet a major strand of a postfeminist sensibility is still the absence or muting of vocabulary for structural change within hegemonic constructions of feminism, and a persistent lack of change in gender power relations (Budgeon, 2011; Gill, 2017, p. 607). I build on this to analyse whether postfeminist discourses of single femininity seemingly celebrate feminist discourses but still fail to challenge gendered structures of power. I also employ this definition to ask what are the *effects* of such a celebration of feminism within the context of single femininities? Finally, I draw from Dosekun's conceptualisation of postfeminism as operating transnationally due to its fundamentally mediated nature (Dosekun, 2015, p. 961) as this allows me to trace connectivities of postfeminist culture *across* genres and locations, as per my focus on transnational media texts (See Chapter 4.2.1).

### **1.5 The tension between representation and lived experience**

To recall, I am interested in the relationship, and more specifically the *tension*, between contemporary constructions of the single woman that concurrently draw on historical and postfeminist tropes to jointly stigmatize single femininity, and increased diversity within lived experience of single women. I want to consider what this means for understandings of femininity in the contemporary context and the significant consequences for women's lives as they encounter and negotiate such representations. To explore this, I will draw on two data sets 1) qualitative interviews and 2) media texts, as a way of focusing on how singledom is discursively configured within women's accounts and media representations *and* on the tensions between lived experience and the cultural constructions of single femininity.

As I elaborate further in Chapter 3, my study is informed by Foucault's insistence that subjectivity is discursively constructed, as this is helpful for thinking through how subjectivity is constructed through

discourses at the cultural level *and* the individual level (Foucault, 1982). I also draw on his theory of technologies of the self to argue that singledom is a set of practices through which femininity subjectivity is being produced (Foucault, 1988). But to enrich Foucault's discursive theory, I combine it with a psychosocial approach which allows me to consider how interiority and desire are implicated within subjectivity formation. I also use psychosocial theory to examine how single femininity is being constructed through gendered discourses of power within media representations and lived experience. Specifically, I use Butler's theory of gender as performative to theorise singledom as a form of gendered performativity which 'performs' but concurrently has the capacity to destabilize, threaten or undo 'normative' femininity. I consider how performative repetitions of single femininity occur, or are disrupted, and to what effect. Finally, I use the concept of fantasy to bring both data sets together and examine how fantasies of singledom work to regulate desires at the cultural and individual level.

Drawing on this strand of thought, I address two main questions to interrogate this tension and the consequences such a tension is having on single women's lives: 1) What fantasies do contemporary cultural representations of the single woman construct and mobilise? 2) How are these fantasies negotiated within women's self-narratives of single subjectivity? Building on these main research questions I further explore how normative constructions of contemporary single femininity are being *sustained, reconfigured or resisted*. I consider what *alternative* fantasies of single femininity are being constructed, in order to fully illuminate the diversity of such constructions. I ask how are gendered power structures being reinforced or challenged? Employing an intersectional approach, I also examine how single femininity intersects with other identity categories. I will use these questions to analyse interviews with women who self-define as single, *combined* with an analysis of eight popular culture media texts from the genres of film, TV, online magazines and advertising.

The media texts I analyse are mainly drawn from UK and US popular culture. As Tasker and Negra (2007, p. 13) argue, US *and* UK popular cultures feature a strong 'discursive harmony'; thus to exclude US texts would be to omit a fundamental part of UK popular culture. I also include one text from the European Nordic Noir genre, which has been a significant part of UK popular culture since the 2010s (Redvall, 2016, p. 345), and is a genre which is increasingly transnational in its outlook (Jermyn, 2017, p. 264). My texts were chosen because they resonate with the themes identified within the literature, but also allow exploration of how these themes emerge across a diverse range of media sites. The selected media texts include two films, one comedy TV show, three TV crime dramas, one advert and one magazine, each of which I will now briefly introduce.

The romantic comedy, *How To Be Single*, stars Alice, a newly-single twentysomething, white, middle-class, heterosexual woman living in New York, who is learning how to negotiate the dating world. Thus, Alice's character allows interrogation of 'typical' postfeminist femininity. *Frances Ha* is a film named after



its central character, who is similarly a newly single twentysomething, white, middle-class woman living in New York. Yet it was chosen as its narrative is unusually centred around Frances' relationship with her best friend rather than her dating life. The TV show *Chewing Gum* stars a black, twentysomething, virgin, but, rather than a glamorous urban setting, Tracey lives in a London council housing estate, allowing exploration of intersections of race, class and chastity. I also examine three primetime TV female detectives: all in their thirties. Saga (*The Bridge/Broen*) and Molly (*Fargo*) are both white police detectives, while Kalinda (*The Good Wife*) is a private investigator of Indian ethnicity at a large US law firm. Not only do these detectives show an older femininity, they allow exploration of a more liminal, deviant single femininity. In the Ford Fiesta ST-Line TV car advert, we meet a youthful, slim, white woman deliberating as to whether she deserves to buy a car, drawing on themes of consumption and self-surveillance. Finally, I have chosen a special online issue of women's consumer magazine, *Elle* US – a key popular cultural media site aimed at single women. As well as analysing these media texts, I have also carried out 25 semi-structured one-hour interviews with women who live in London, and who self-define as female and single. London was chosen as a location for the interviews as it contains a rich range of class, race, sexuality and age groups from which to draw a diverse sample and explore femininity across a range of intersections (See Chapter 4.2.4 for full discussion).

In summary, in this study, I aim to examine the tensions *between* what it has been argued are largely stigmatizing cultural fantasies of the single woman, and the narratives of single women's lived experience. Using a discourse analysis, informed by Foucault's technologies of the self, with a Butlerian psychosocial understanding of subjectivity, I ask how single women negotiate and/or resist what seem to be narrow, highly regulatory cultural fantasies and examine the significance of such cultural fantasies for single women. To do so, qualitative research in the form of semi-structured interviews with 25 self-defined single women is combined with a discursive analysis of eight popular cultural media texts.

## **1.6 Structure of the thesis**

The next chapter, **Chapter 2**, details the current literature on singledom and femininity in relation to both cultural representations and lived experience. It has been argued that historical tropes of single femininity have been reconfigured and transformed through postfeminist discourses in contemporary US-UK popular culture (Taylor, 2012, p. 58). To situate the contemporary moment with which I am concerned, I start by examining the *historical* context of how the single woman has been constructed within a range of US and UK cultural texts since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. I then examine how such a figure is constructed within the current postfeminist context to investigate where contemporary mediated constructions repeat, reconfigure or break with the key historical tropes that I have identified. I argue that literature on single women's lived experience is limited, and largely structured around themes of abjection/stigmatisation, resistance and alternative relationship formations. I then explore the existing studies which have investigated media representations and lived experience of singledom together.

Finally, I introduce my conceptual framework, showing how it builds upon and departs from the literature, and how it troubles current binaries, and allows a deeper understanding of how women experience, negotiate and resist representations of singledom.

In **Chapter 3**, I discuss my approach to exploring the intersection between feminine subjectivity and the cultural realm from a theoretical perspective. As outlined, I draw on a Foucauldian understanding of subjectivity as being discursively produced and disciplined through multiple intersecting, gendered regimes of power (Foucault, 1982). I complement this approach with a Butlerian psychosocial theory of subjectivity to understand how the subject is both constitutive *of* and *by* the social. I theorise singledom as a form of gendered performativity which ‘performs’ but concurrently has the capacity to destabilize, threaten or undo ‘normative’ femininity. I draw together the spheres of the cultural with the psychic through the conceptual lens of fantasy to explore how *desires* at both the cultural and individual level work fantasmically to construct single femininities.

In **Chapter 4**, I discuss the methodological design of the study, informed by my interest in both representations of and lived experience of single women, to investigate the tensions between single feminine subjectivity at the cultural *and* individual psychic level. This is done through analysis of how single femininity is constructed in mass media popular cultural texts *and* self-narratives of lived experience. I draw on two data sets – eight media texts from a range of genres, and 25 semi-structured in-depth interviews with single women living in London. A thematic and Foucauldian discourse analysis, which incorporates an intersectional approach, has then been conducted on each set. I draw both data sets together through an analysis of how the single women negotiated cultural fantasies identified within *and* outside the media texts, following the research questions. Finally, I discuss why this study incorporates a feminist ethics of care towards the interviewees, the problems of giving voice to others, and how I sought to negotiate power dynamics inherent within the interview process. I also reflect on how the research is fundamentally shaped by my *own* positioning.

Chapters 5 to 7 present my study findings, organised by three key themes: freedom, self-surveillance and abjectionification. In **Chapter 5**, I examine how celebratory fantasies of ‘successful’ single femininity are centred around discourses of freedom, agency, autonomy and independence. I consider how these fantasies of ‘freedom’ narrowly construct single femininities in multiple regulatory ways and are deeply temporally intersected. I argue that these discourses are often met with ambivalence by the interviewees, and are fundamentally shaped by intersections of age and class. However, discourses of freedom, in certain moments, are found to *transform* gendered structures of power, particularly when intersected with sexuality and race. In **Chapter 6**, I reveal that fantasies of ‘freedom’ obscure the intensive processes of self-surveillance and regulation through which the single subject is actively produced. Drawing on a Foucauldian conceptualisation of power as productive, the single woman is incited through discourses

of surveillance to continually identify, regulate and transform her single 'self' in order to 'perform' a successful single femininity. Troublingly, discourses of surveillance have distressing consequences for the single women I interview, even as they work to resist them. Then, in **Chapter 7**, I examine what happens when the single woman *fails* to correctly 'perform' her single subjectivity in such narrow, self-regulating ways. I argue that it is through multiple abjectifying processes of silencing, illegibility and incoherence, that the *necessary* 'failure' of the single female subject occurs. I explore the significant consequences of such 'failure' on the women I interview, which both painfully abjectifies single femininity and, ideologically, sustains the boundaries of normative femininity. However, I also find that such failure at times 'undoes' and thus potentially transforms the regulatory boundaries of normative feminine subjectivity in more liberatory ways.

My concluding chapter, **Chapter 8**, reflects on and draws together my analysis to argue that single femininity in the contemporary moment is often produced in *deeply* regulatory ways which reinvigorate historical and postfeminist tropes. While both the media representations and single women's narratives offer moments of transformation, with more significant forms of resistance within single woman's lived experience – their accounts reveal the significant psychic tension and heavy emotional cost which such negotiations produce. Overall my thesis productively draws on Butlerian psychosocial theory to incorporate the concept of fantasy with a discursive understanding of subjectivity and theorises singledom as a *form* of gendered performativity which troubles femininity (Butler, 1997). In doing so it contributes to a deeper understanding of the interplay between the cultural and the psychic within feminine subjectivity formation in a postfeminist context.

In the next chapter, I turn to surveying what has already been written about single femininity, to consider where the limits of our understandings lie, and chart how I am going to expand on these through this study. I take a look back at how the figure of the single woman has been historically constructed in cultural texts in the US-UK order to establish the connections with, and breaks from, contemporary configurations, identifying along the way the grip that 'past' understandings *still* hold on our collective cultural imaginary. I explore how literature examining the lives of single women has revealed substantial diversity in lived experience but often does so in a reductive way through a binary of stigma or resistance and I outline how I will overcome such a limitation. While age is an important intersection in the literature, many studies fail to consider different age categories *together* – how they vary but more importantly where they connect, and how this might offer a more complex understanding of lived experience. Finally, I consider the limited research into how single women encounter and negotiate cultural representations of singledom. But more importantly I try to address some of the questions raised in the introduction to this chapter which brought me to this project and most concern me. To recap, these centre around why our cultural fantasies of singledom continue to reinscribe narrow understandings of what constitutes success within intimate life, and what it means to live amongst such

an imaginary. My study seeks to illuminate not only the painful consequences of such encounters but also how we might interrogate and transform these limitations through an understanding of the diverse and complex range of intimate connections and forms of love that exist *outside* the boundaries of normative romantic coupledness.

## Chapter 2. Mediated constructions and lived experience of single femininity

### 2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to situate my study within scholarship on lived experience and cultural representations of single femininity. I will explain how I build on and depart from this existing scholarship, where I direct my focus and why. As discussed in Chapter 1.1, while I am not investigating coupled femininity, single femininity is positioned in the wider context of the continued privileging of monogamous heteronormative coupledness in contemporary Western society and is constructed *through* and *by* normative coupled femininity (Finlay & Clarke, 2003; Ingraham, 1999; Rich, 1980; Rosa, 1994; Simpson, 2006). Indeed, the coupled unit is placed ‘at the centre of the normative practice of sexuality’ and is the lens through which normative femininity continues to be constructed (Budgeon, 2008, p. 302; Roseneil, et al, 2020). Through the gender binary, femininity is orientated in opposition to masculinity towards care networks, relationships and the ideology of the family (Budgeon, 2015, p. 3). The institutionalisation of the couple through marriage has retained its position in Western society as the most ‘prestigious way of living your life’ and the ‘gold standard’ of relationships (Finlay & Clarke, 2003, p. 416; Heise, 2012), even as marriage rates have declined (See Chapter 1.2). The continued cultural and symbolic importance of the wedding in popular culture and the inextricably linked institution of marriage within late 20<sup>th</sup>/early 21<sup>st</sup> century intimate relationships has been noted by multiple scholars (Ingraham, 1999, p. 5; Kay, Kennedy, Wood, 2020; Otnes & Pleck, 2003, p. 4). Despite some shifts in the cultural representation of married femininity, being a wife ‘continues to serve as the structuring conceptualisation of the American woman’s life’, contends Susanne Leonard in her study of the wife in US popular culture (Leonard, 2019, p. 29). It has recently been argued that there is an *intensifying* desire for engagement with the wedding spectacle within popular culture (Ingraham, 2008; Kay, Kennedy, Wood, 2020). It is in this context of the privileging of heteronormative coupledness and the construction of normative femininity through coupledness, that the single woman is used to establish and sustain such a norm through her abjectified positioning at the *boundaries* of femininity (Butler, 1997).

Much of the scholarship about single women in the US and UK context, both historically and in the contemporary moment, is within the fields of psychiatry, therapy and mental health (Anderson & Stewart, 1994; Emery & White, 2006; Gordon, 2003; Lahad & Shoshana, 2015; Lewis & Borders, 1995). There is also a significant body of literature written from a policy-based or feminist economics perspective and a sociological perspective, in relation to economic and material inequalities (Chasteen, 1994; Gornick et al, 2009; Jamieson & Simpson, 2013; Kislev, 2019; Yamokoski & Keister, 2006). While these works have informed my broad understanding, I depart from these to critically explore how feminine subjectivity is constructed through cultural discourses and self-narratives of lived experience. Most of the research into contemporary singledom and femininity has centred around popular cultural

representations of the single woman (Fink, 2012; Koeing et al, 2010; Lahad & Hazan, 2014; Taylor, 2012) rather than lived experience. Therefore I add to the existing limited scholarship on single women's lived experience (Lai et al., 2015; Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003a), while remaining attentive to popular cultural texts as a significant site for the construction of feminine subjectivities (see Chapter 1.3). There is also an absence of literature theorising how single subjectivity formation occurs in relation to the cultural realm (See Chapter 3.1); a critical gap which I attempt to address in my exploration of how single women encounter and negotiate contemporary cultural representations of singledom within lived experience. Finally, there is a lack of literature which situates *both* spheres within a historical context – a task I also undertake in this thesis.

While I focus on contemporary cultural representations and lived experience, in what follows I expand the lens to see how the single woman is constructed in historical cultural texts in the US and UK. I will chart how the current mediated figure of the single woman has emerged from historical cultural discourses and contextualise how contemporary constructions of the single woman draw upon and/or reconfigure historical tropes. I first examine how key historical tropes emerged in relation to wider social changes and how these tropes relate to contemporary cultural discourses on single women. I argue that key historical tropes of chastity/asexuality, deviancy, vulnerability and mental instability, sexualisation and professionalization have not been *replaced* by contemporary discourses but have *persisted* alongside newer postfeminist themes, underlying their importance and relevance for my contemporary analysis. I show that these key historical tropes play a significant role in the contemporary postfeminist cultural moment and contribute to what appears to be a deeply stigmatizing and narrowly constructed depiction of feminine subjectivity (See Chapter 1.2). I then examine how the figure of the single woman is configured in contemporary popular culture, and how she revives historical themes of deviancy, mental instability and social isolation, alongside a reconfiguration of themes of professionalisation, hypersexualisation and self-surveillance.

Next, I review the literature on women's lived experience of singledom in the US and UK. While overall there is a lack of research which examines the lived experience of single women, and singles more broadly, existing studies seem to suggest that there is a great diversity of experience and variation within the relationship patterns and perceptions of singledom (Dalton, 1992; Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2016; Lai et al., 2015; Reynolds, Wetherell, & Taylor, 2007). Most research about single women's lived experience is structured around themes of stigmatisation and/or resistance to stigmatisation and explores how singledom is intersected with age – with a strong focus on mid-life and older women – and sexuality (L. Miller, 2020). Notably, there is a lack of UK-based analysis incorporating a racial analysis of single women, and many of the texts examining the lived experience and cultural representation of African American and ethnic minorities are from a US context, therefore I aim to address this lacuna.

Several studies focus on the alternative relationship structures of single woman, such as friendship and wider kinship or care networks (Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2016; Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004). It has been argued that alternative relationship structures may be conceptualized as forms of resistance to stigmatisation (Budgeon, 2008). I therefore investigate whether such resistance emerges in the present moment and what opportunities it may offer for a transformation and reconfiguration of single female subjectivities. I will also discuss recent shifts in the literature which go beyond stigmatisation/resistance and how I complexify and build upon such debates to move beyond these limited framings. In the final section of this chapter I critically assess the literature which has analysed how single women negotiate media representations of single femininity and how I will build on this to consider how single women negotiate constructions of single femininity in contemporary popular cultural representation. I will then discuss how this review establishes the grounding for my theoretical framework, to be discussed in Chapter 3.

## **2.2 The mediated figure of the single woman from past to present**

### **2.2.1 The historical figure of the single woman in cultural representations**

In this section I chart the historical representation of the single woman in the US and UK, from 1900-1990. I do not aim to provide an exhaustive historical analysis, but this time period offers crucial context within which to situate the contemporary moment and with which we can understand singledom in relation to the significant social changes which took place. I begin after the Victorian era, at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, as I consider this as a distinct epoch, during which there was a seismic cultural shift. This was characterised by events such as the flourishing of the suffragette movements in the US-UK; the emergence of the ‘new woman’ (Israel, 2003) and a rejection of Victorian values (Holden, 2007). I end my historical analysis at the 1990s – the period from which the emergence of postfeminist culture is commonly agreed to have taken place (notwithstanding the contestation over the boundaries of postfeminism, see Chapter 1.4).

In reviewing a range of cultural texts, including popular media, policy, governmental, medical and religious texts, I have identified five major historical tropes associated with discourses about the single woman. These will be explored in more depth below: chastity/asexuality; vulnerability/mental instability; deviancy; sexualisation and professionalisation.

#### ***A) Chastity/asexuality***

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the US and UK, the single woman was strongly linked to the

chaste or asexual ‘spinster’ figure – although such a term has a long history<sup>9</sup>. Religious discourses in Britain constructed femininity around the traditional family structure of marriage and childrearing (Jorgensen-Earp, 1990, p. 86), thus single, childless women were deemed ‘redundant’. With a proliferation of missionary programmes in the US and Britain at this time, single women were often seen as suited to such religious work (Bowie, Kirkwood, & Ardener, 1993, p. 38), where they were constructed as being chastely ‘married to god’ (Arrington, 2010, p. 284). Arrington’s account of a US Christian missionary in the 1920s reveals popular representations depicted her in ‘unstylish dress and wire-rimmed glasses’ signifying that she was unattractive (Arrington, 2010, p. 282). The development of psychological theory in the US and UK in the post-World War I period led to a shift in attitude towards single women’s chastity. While previously chastity was seen as a moral strength, during the interwar years her chastity became a form of psychological disorder, and single women were attacked and called ‘frustrated spinsters’ (Holden, 2007, p. 127). Advice books written by psychologists for women explained that the repression of love caused by chastity would produce feelings of inferiority and unfulfillment within the single woman (Holden, 2007). Indeed the figure of the ‘psycho spinster’ emerged in the US during the late 1920s, with one biologist describing spinsters as ‘inherently frustrated... vicious and destructive creatures’ with a ‘thwarted instinct’ (Israel, 2003, p. 261).

Several scholars have claimed that during the post- World War II period, as more women entered the workforce, the spinster’s representation become slightly less negative. For example, Tincknell’s analysis shows how the single woman emerges in the UK’s *Carry On* films. These films were a prolific franchise of low-budget comedy movies produced between 1958 and 1979 (Tincknell, 2015). Peaking in popularity in the 1960s, they were characterised by a celebration of innuendo-based slapstick and deeply racist and misogynist humour. Tincknell argues that here the spinster was reconfigured to *positively* represent professional competence via the figure of the matron, while still being inherently asexual (Tincknell, 2015). Yet, as Gordon claims in her study of how single women were historically represented in the US and UK in the 1950s, the prominence of the ‘ideal’ nuclear family in the 1950s once more led to the single woman as being negatively portrayed as socially ‘isolated and frustrated, and therefore forever incomplete’ due to her social exclusion (Gordon, 1994, p. 16).

## ***B) Deviancy***

The single woman has also been aligned with psychological disorder through tropes of deviancy. While again discourses of deviancy have long been prevalent, they were exacerbated by the social anxiety caused by World War I (Holden, 2007, p. 84). Holden describes how British popular war novels during

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<sup>9</sup> The pejorative use of the word spinster dates from mid-1600s Britain (Froide, 2005, p. 159) and the early 1700s in the US (Israel, 2003) and associated the single women with chastity/asexuality (Fink, 2012). Froide suggests that non-pejorative use occurred as early as the second-half of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century as form of social categorization for the unmarried woman (Froide, 2005, p. 159).



the early 20<sup>th</sup> century depicted the single woman as being wildly ‘beyond the control of men’ (Holden, 2007, p.30). Holden claims that during the interwar period in Britain, the number of unmarried women declined as those remaining unmarried became even more unacceptable (Holden, 2007). The older single woman was portrayed in novels and films as a disruptive and dangerous social group who might persuade younger women not to marry (Holden, 2007, pp. 11–12). Meanwhile Israel argues that in the US, the economic pressures of the 1930s Depression saw single women persistently linked to deviancy, such as alcoholism and criminality (Israel, 2003, p. 266). For example, in the 1935 film *Dangerous*, Bette Davis plays a character who disfigures her husband when he refuses her a divorce, and then descends into alcoholism (Israel, 2003, p. 308). However, with the expansion of the welfare state and the professions post-World War II, such economic pressures were relieved as the number of jobs in both the US and UK grew. As a result, women gained more economic independence and moved into the workplace in greater numbers (Holden, 2007). During this period UK media and transcripts from court cases depicted single women as being *less* aberrant (Seal, 2009). Yet the single woman continued to be linked to deviancy through her sexuality, with the publishing of the Kinsey *Report on Female Sexuality* in 1953 in the US, gaining widespread popular attention for its discussion of young women’s same-sex encounters. This led to panicked headlines urging women to ‘marry now or marry never’ (Israel, 2003, p. 312), reinforcing heterosexual coupledness.

### ***C) Vulnerability and mental instability***

The single woman has historically been constructed through tropes of vulnerability and mental fragility, which are both intertwined with deviancy and chastity. The development of psychoanalysis and Freud’s theories in the 1920s and 1930s was a major factor that led to single women being tied to mental instability in the US and UK (Holden, 2011; Hutton, 1937; Seal, 2009; Young, 1940). Psychoanalytical discourses foregrounded sexuality in development and reinforced singledom as a psychological ‘problem’. Jeffreys claims labels such as ‘frigid’ emerged in the US at this time and ‘othered’ them as sexually deviant, constructing only a heterosexual relationship as ‘healthy’ (Jeffreys, 1997, p. 169). Discourses of sexual disorder entered popular culture via advice columns by figures such as Marie Stopes in the UK and US (Young, 1940). Patricia O’Brian’s historical analysis of single women in the US, *The Woman Alone*, aligned them, as the title suggest, with loneliness and powerlessness (O’Brian, 1973). Economic vulnerability, particularly in the depressed post-World War I period, was highlighted in best-selling self-help books such as Marjorie Hillis’ *Live Alone and Like it: a Guide for the Extra Woman* in the UK (Hillis, 1936). The text urges the ‘extra woman’ to ‘avoid self-pity’ and manage a small budget while still enjoying an ‘elegant, pleasurable’ life, suggesting that single women, while enduring economic hardship must also self-regulate against the material consequences of economic vulnerability (Hillis, 1936). Holden and Tincknell argue that fictional depictions of the matron or nanny in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century constructed the single woman as having latent, biological desires for motherhood which led to an

‘unhealthy’ channelling of these desires into other relationships, such as close friendships (Holden, 2011; Tincknell, 2015). Medical texts such as Kimball Young’s *Personality and Problems of Adjustment* (Young, 1940) claimed that psychological disorders were inevitable for the single woman, naturalising an association with mental illness. Similarly, government policy documents – *Social Isolation Of The Single Woman With Dependents* (1973) and *Financial Hardship and the Single Woman* (1973) – in the UK linked single women with social isolation and vulnerability in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

#### **D) Sexualisation**

Each of the tropes identified have at certain points also been intertwined with the central trope of sexualisation. Discourses of sexualisation of single femininity in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were largely stratified along class and race lines, frequently being used to depict working class, migrant or black women in the US as deviantly promiscuous (Israel, 2003, p. 120; Willey, 2014, p. 7). The movement of women into the workplace during World War 1 led to the ‘flapper films’, where single women were depicted as sexualised, within limits – they were not shown as a ‘sexual vixen’, just a ‘tease’ (Israel, 2003, p. 132). In the 1960s, advances in birth control and increasing income levels in the US and UK led to a challenging of the chaste or asexual image of the single woman. For example, Helen Gurley Brown’s popular US self-help text *Sex and the Single Girl: the Unmarried Woman’s Guide to Men, Careers, the Apartment, Diet, Fashion, Money and Men* (Brown, 1962) represented a shift towards a more positive, yet highly sexualised, construction of the single woman as sexually agentic. Published in 1962, the book encouraged single women to enjoy their economic freedom and engage in casual sexual encounters prior to or even instead of marriage in a way which had previously not been celebrated in the cultural mainstream. She was also encouraged to maintain a sexually attractive appearance. As the title suggests, while the text prioritised sexual relationships, it discussed how single women could develop all areas of their life. The book has since been updated and republished in 2003 demonstrating its continued relevance. However the text has been critiqued as constructing the single woman as deeply self-surveilling and still seeking a heteronormative partnership (Gill & Orgad, in press; Taylor, 2012, p. 48). McRobbie’s feminist critique highlights how by the 1980s in the US and UK, the sexualisation of the single woman was being intertwined in stigmatizing ways with mental instability through the hit US thriller *Fatal Attraction* (McRobbie, 2009, p. 35). In the film, the main character has a short affair with a married man, then obsessively pursues him, torturing his pet rabbit and attempting to murder him and his wife. The cultural resonance of the film was such that the trope of a ‘bunny-boiler’ persists as contemporary slang for a spurned, emotionally unstable woman.

#### **E) Professionalisation**

In comparison to the tropes examined so far, the single woman has been constructed more positively through discourses of professionalisation. For example Fink argues that in the US at the start of the

century, increased education led to the idea of ‘single blessedness’ where a career was a viable alternative to marriage (Fink, 2012, p. 32). But this was largely limited to upper class white women (Molloy, 2016, p. 404). In the interwar period, as more women moved into urban areas and jobs became scarce during the US Depression (Israel, 2003, p. 288), the professional single woman was demonised in films such as *Babyface* (1933) as heartlessly stealing men’s jobs. The single career girl was glamorised in the 1950s within popular novels and magazines (Holden, 2007, p. 39; Israel, 2003, p. 218). Yet Israel highlights a US magazine survey in 1956 which showed her to be a ‘failed woman’, as conservative values returned post World-War II (Israel, 2003, p. 21). Indeed, Bequaert’s sociological study of single women in the US in the 1970s warns against the ‘hollowness’ of being a ‘single career woman’ (Bequaert, 1976). By the 1980s, economic growth in the UK and US led to strengthened mainstream depictions (Taylor, 2011, p.53). For example, popular Hollywood films such as *Working Girl*, released in 1988, showed a working-class single woman climbing the corporate ladder in New York. Meg, played by Melanie Griffiths, is a white, twentysomething woman who ruthlessly competes with her female boss and engages in casual sexual encounters. The film continues to associate single professional women with cold-hearted ambition, which is seen as incompatible with meaningful intimate relationships. This historical trope has been significantly reinvigorated in postfeminist culture (See Chapter 2.2.2B below).

Having outlined the major historical tropes of the single woman since the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century across a range of literature, I now discuss how contemporary postfeminist discourses take up, reconfigure and depart from these tropes.

### **2.2.2 The contemporary figure of the single woman in popular culture: continuities and postfeminist reconfigurations**

The historical tropes discussed remain significant to the construction of the single woman in the contemporary context through both their continuity and reconfiguration. I chart the contemporary cultural moment from the 1990s, a time that is marked by a deepening of neoconservative values within the US/UK (Negra, 2004) and the emergence of what has been commonly critiqued as a postfeminist culture. It is in this postfeminist context (See Chapter 1.4 for a discussion of postfeminism) that the single woman has not only revived but reconstructed historical tropes in new ways (Budgeon, 2015). Having reviewed scholarship on single femininity in the popular cultural genres of TV, literature, periodicals, newspapers, advertising and websites, I identify six major themes which emerged: deviancy, social isolation, mental instability, professionalisation, hypersexualisation, and self-surveillance.

#### ***A) Continuities: Deviancy, social isolation and mental instability***

Single females in contemporary popular representations continue to be constructed as **deviant**. The single woman is made deviant through risk-taking activity such as criminality and promiscuity,

according to Angela Willey's feminist film analysis. Willey claims that while the single woman is more visible in contemporary representations, themes of deviancy evoke her, then dismiss her as undesirable through self-destructive behaviour such as excessive drinking and smoking (Willey, 2014). Deviancy is intersected with race, class and homosexuality to more deeply regulate certain single femininities – those which are working class, lesbian or black – and construct them as less desirable (King, 2014; Willey, 2014). For example, Dubrofsky suggests that historical themes in US TV show *The Bachelor* reinvigorate and reassociate non-white single femininity with the sexual promiscuity of the Orientalist Harem (Dubrofsky, 2006). The show draws on historical associations of slavery in the US, where black female slaves were required to satisfy the sexual desires of the white slave master (Dubrofsky, 2006; Willey, 2014). In contrast, Rodie argues discourses of promiscuity are reconfigured in TV/film series *Sex and the City* to sustain feminist-inspired social change by allowing a more fluid form of sexuality which transcends normative categories (Rodie, 2006). Yet in reality TV shows even excessive displays of emotion render the single woman as dangerous, disruptive and threatening, unable to control herself and surrendering to bodily emotions in *The Bachelor* (Dubrofsky, 2009; Rodie, 2006). Negra makes a nuanced argument about the limited potential of deviancy to disrupt patriarchal, racist structures, describing how *Sex and the City* challenges discourses of promiscuity as deviant but fails to fully critique them (Negra, 2004). Negra argues that while the series 'destabilises... the pernicious mythologizing of contemporary femininity,' it still reinscribes monogamous coupledness (Negra, 2004, p. 7). For example, Charlotte's wedding exposes flaws in her coupling and the self-deception of wedding rituals, but she still gets married (Negra, 2004).

The historical trope of the chaste/asexual 'spinster' persists in the US contemporary context, despite widespread claims of its redundancy (Fink, 2012). Yet rather than being associated with chastity as it once was (see above), contemporary cultural constructions now associate the single woman more with **social isolation**: as 'lonely... on the periphery of life, unable to join in,' (Negra, 2004). Building on Fink's critique, Perez Valverde's analysis of UK children's literature argues that the modern spinster – as depicted by a 1980s story, *Ms Wiz*, about a single female wizard – uses her marginality to agentially challenge patriarchal structures and dismantle the nuclear family (Pérez Valverde, 2009, p. 271). The character of Mis Wiz also challenges tropes of isolation by being depicted as intimately, rather than dysfunctionally, connected to the children around her.

Several critics have argued that the single woman in postfeminist popular culture continues to be 'othered' as **mentally unstable** and stalled in her development – rendered a perpetual adolescent (Gennaro, 2007; Lahad & Hazan, 2014). For example, as Moseley and Reed point out in their analysis of TV show, *Ally McBeal*, the protagonist is shown staring out at the Boston city skyline, dwarfed by its perspective and often self-infantilises, calling herself a little girl in an 'old boy's club' (Moseley & Read, 2002, pp. 244, 247). Similarly, *Sex and the City* celebrates thirtysomething women as enjoying an eternal girlhood, argues Negra (Negra, 2004). The majority media studies have observed how close non-sexual

relationships are still frequently problematized as pathological, particularly when intersected with sexuality (King, 2014; Pérez Valverde, 2009). Close female friendships are represented as a misdirected channelling of a desire to be mothers, or as ‘illegitimate’ love, with cultural critiques arguing that they sustain heteronormativity and coupling (Spooner, 2001). Single women continue to be associated with mental dysfunction. For example, the 1990s TV character Ally McBeal is depicted as blighted by neurosis and hallucinations caused by a suppressed longing to be coupled (Busch, 2009, p. 91; Hermes, 2006). Similarly, in their feminist analysis of the novel *Bridget Jones’s Diary* and its sequel *Beyond the Edge of Reason*, Maddison and Storr agree that her portrayal links white female singledom to neurosis and anxiety (Maddison & Storr, 2004).

### ***B) Reconfigurations: professionalisation, hypersexualisation, self-surveillance***

While contemporary representations largely build on and mobilise historical tropes, they at times profoundly reconfigure them in new ways. The single ‘career woman’ trope has been fuelled by neoliberal discourses of **professionalisation** since the 1990s (Thompson, 1990). Feminist media scholars have identified how prominent texts about single women, such as *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, *Sex And The City* and *Ally McBeal* have often constructed her as white, white-collar and middle class (Taylor, 2012, p. 58) and display her singledom as a free, independent and agentic ‘choice’ (see debates on ‘choice’ in scholarship on lived experience, below). Chambers argues that such a ‘choice’ is not unproblematic, with the professional single shown as both ‘aggressor and victim of rampant individualism’ (Chambers, 2005, p. 163). Her career success is incompatible with fulfilling personal relationships (Genz, 2010) and she is constructed as selfish, cold and unhappy (Atkin, 1991; Busch, 2009; Chambers, 2005; Maddison & Storr, 2004). Negra conversely claims that during recession of the 2000s the trope of the single career woman was in retreat and media depicted the white professional single woman returning ‘home’ to a perfected domesticity (Negra, 2009). But in her analysis of US advertising, Henderson argues this narrative has become abjectifying when it is intersected with class and race (Henderson, 2009). For instance, themes of retreatism identified within white postfeminist representations of single femininity are similarly taken up in media texts orientated towards black audiences (Springer, 2007). Yet they are reconfigured to different political ends, for example to construct certain forms of single black middle-class femininity as representing or transgressing problematic notions of ‘racial authenticity’ or as suffering a loss of ‘blackness’.

While single black femininity has long been **hypersexualised** (Willey, 2014), this persistent trope has now been reinvigorated and broadened to incorporate white femininity, in a process of deepening hypersexualisation. Such sexualization intersects with age in competing ways: while the asexual ‘spinster’ persists, the older single woman has also been reconfigured via the hypersexualised figure of the ‘cougar’, who sleeps with younger men (Montemurro & Siefken, 2014; Taylor, 2012). There is some debate over whether constructions of female singledom as sexually liberated and agentic within such

texts are positive or even subversive (Negra, 2004; A. Taylor, 2011). Indeed, sexual liberation has been linked again to themes of choice, but also to empowerment (Alarie & Carmichael, 2015; Montemurro & Siefken, 2014; Taylor, 2012). Yet Taylor notes that even within an apparently liberatory text, such as TV show *Sex and the City*, the main focus of the show is still couched in searching for coupledness. Her liberation is limited to sexuality and consumption, and only for those of a particular race and class (Negra, 2004; Taylor, 2012, p. 69). More positively, Gerhard argues that discourses of hypersexualisation in texts such as *Sex and the City* queer normative femininity by troubling the naturalising binary between masculine and feminine behaviour (Gerhard, 2005; also Rodie, 2006). However, there are persistent racial disparities within how the single woman is sexualized. This is illuminated well by Dubrofsky's account of how the TV show *The Bachelor* draws upon the logic of relational choice to naturalise black femininity as being sexually desirable, and in doing so works to invisibly recentre white femininity as coupled (Dubrofsky, 2006, p.40).

While tropes of **self-surveillance** predate postfeminism (Brown, 1962), femininity has become a key site for intensified discourses of self-regulation and self-transformation in a postfeminist context (Gill, 2007). Singledom has thus become a 'problem' to be remedied or managed by the individual through an intensive regime of self-accountability and responsibility (Gill, 2009, p. 353). Anthea Taylor's 2012 major study of single femininity critically analyses how the figure of the single woman emerges in discourses across a variety of popular cultural genres. Taylor argues that while her construction as an aberration still occurs, the single woman is being refigured primarily through postfeminist discourses of self-surveillance and self-transformation, with the most prominent single female the one who wishes to be otherwise and is in the process of change (Taylor, 2012, p. 15). While I similarly draw on a postfeminist framework, my analysis seeks to update Taylor's emphasis on self-surveillance by exploring how incitements to self-transform and makeover the self may have shifted in the decade since it was published (2012). I draw on more recent conceptualisations of postfeminism which emphasise how discourses of self-surveillance have now infiltrated all forms of conduct, including the psyche, to construct a particular regulatory 'affective mood' (Elias et al., 2017; Favaro, 2017). I will therefore explore the role of affect and how single women's feelings are being incited and/or 'policed' through such discourses of self-surveillance and transformation. Importantly, I will also consider how the lived experience of singledom is shaped at the psychic level through these forms of affective self-regulation. I will examine how the erosion of the welfare state, greater economic precarity, and weaker social ties have perhaps affected how singledom may operate as a 'technology of the self' in new, more intensively regulatory, ways (Foucault, 1988; McRobbie, 2020). I will also interrogate how this regulation may be deepened further by generational differences, particularly for younger women.

Gill has explored how advice columns produce subjects who must organize their interior life in particular ways, via what Gill terms 'intimate entrepreneurship repertoires', and use their autonomy to

help them find a man, while presenting this as pleasurable, personal choice (Gill, 2009b). The single female is required to be deeply self-regulatory, and reinscribes patriarchal regimes by drawing on feminist-inspired discourses of empowerment, freedom and agency, where the single woman ‘freely and actively’ works to make herself ‘unsingle’ (Budgeon, 2011; Gill, 2009b, p. 353). Kinneret Lahad agrees with Gill that women are required to always present their single status as a ‘choice’ (Lahad, 2014). A prominent theorist of singledom and representation, Lahad’s work has broadly investigated how discourses of self-surveillance and singlehood emerge alongside gender and temporality in Israeli contemporary culture, which she argues features many of the same postfeminist discourses as Europe and the US. Lahad investigates a wide range of cultural texts, from television, magazines, online forums and blogs, to claim that postfeminist discourses of choice have been intersected with temporality to deepen their regulatory force and construct hegemonic and alternative forms of subjectivity (Lahad, 2014, 2017). She states that ‘time’ has become ever more regulatory, requiring single women to comply with an increasingly rigid timescale, where life events, including the transition from single to married, must be completed not only within a certain time but in a particular order according to heteronormative life scripts (Lahad, 2016b, 2017). In her book, *Table for One*, she argues that temporal surveillance can however be disrupted by long-term singledom, which offers the potential for resistance, or ‘temporal autonomy’ (Lahad, 2017, pp. 25, 39). In her study with May, I am inspired by Lahad’s use of critical discourse analysis, and her application of Goffman’s concept of territories of the self, to demonstrate how the ability of women to dine alone and not feel stigmatised is regulated by the time of day (Lahad & May, 2017). Discourses of agency have also been problematised by Lahad as ‘sustaining’ neoliberalism by constructing single subjectivity as simply a failure to ‘choose’ and behave correctly, rather than as challenging patriarchal structures (Lahad, 2013, 2016b).

Having reviewed historical and contemporary cultural representations and discourses of single femininity, I now move to examine the second realm my study is focused on, namely how single subjectivity has been studied and understood in women’s lived experience. I identify three key themes: 1) stigmatization/ abjection; 2) resistance to stigmatization; 3) alternative relationship formation. I then discuss how such themes have been addressed in studies which examine both lived experience *and* media representation together.

### **2.3 Lived experience: stigmatisation, resistance and alternative relationship formations**

Studies about single women have indicated the significant diversity, complexity and multifaceted nature of their lived experiences (Dalton, 1992; Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2016; Lai et al., 2015). Yet as I elaborate below, they have also identified themes that parallel as well as are in tension with literature on cultural representations. Scholarship on the lived experience of singledom has largely been conducted from a critical discursive psychology approach to understand how women experience and construct their single subjectivities (Jacques & Radtke, 2012; Reynolds & Taylor, 2005; Reynolds &

Wetherell, 2003a; Reynolds et al., 2007; Zajicek & Koski, 2003). Critical discursive psychology focuses on how individuals construct their identity by drawing upon culturally constructed linguistic resources and repertoires (Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003a). Or studies have taken a phenomenological approach which focuses on individuals' own perceptions of their social and cultural environment, but with more emphasis on the social context and experiences of this (L. Miller, 2020; Sharp & Ganong, 2011).

As discussed, (see Chapter 2.2.2B above), single female subjectivity in contemporary popular culture is often produced through postfeminist discourses of self-surveillance and self-regulation. However within scholarship on lived experience, while there are some similar postfeminist themes, there is a lack of studies which examine self-surveillance, except more tenuously in relation to the construction of the self (Budgeon, 2015). Class is also largely neglected as a topic: Bay-Cheng & Goodkind's research is one of the *few* studies to consider how the intersection of class influences women's attitudes towards singledom through a quantitative analysis (Bay-Cheng & Goodkind, 2016).

### **2.3.1 The object single: stigmatisation and resistance**

Having outlined how sociological studies of lived experience of singledom have been approached more broadly, in this section I look in detail at the key topics which have been researched. Studies have largely been organised around considering whether singledom is stigmatised, for example as a 'deficit' identity or whether such stigmatisation is 'resisted' (Addie & Brownlow, 2014; Byrne & Carr, 2005; Depaulo & Morris, 2005; A. N. Williams, 2014). As I elaborate below, studies have examined this in the context of postfeminist themes of agency, choice, independence, as well as how stigma intersects with (predominantly older) age (Budgeon, 2015; Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2016; Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003a; Reynolds et al., 2007; Sharp & Ganong, 2007). For example, Reynolds, Wetherall and Taylor, from a critical discursive psychology perspective, claim that single women's narratives of single subjectivity employ the postfeminist rhetoric of choice to negotiate stigma, according to culturally sanctioned norms (Reynolds et al., 2007, p. 333) In a discursive analysis of 30 single women's narratives of lived experience, the authors argue women employ the rhetoric of choice and agency to negotiate stigma. But overall they found that this 'resistance' sustains rather than resists the coupled norm (Reynolds et al., 2007, p. 333). The concept of choice and self-accountability is further problematized in Budgeon's study examining the stigmatization of single women. Budgeon argues that in a postfeminist cultural context, women's 'choices' 'within intimate life are still required to conform to gendered heterosexual norms, otherwise they will encounter stigma (Budgeon, 2015).

Several studies have explored how the stigmatisation of singledom is interlinked with older femininity (Dalton, 1992; Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2016; Sandfield & Percy, 2003). In her research into mid-life and older single women, Gordon asks whether single women are 'still' stigmatised through



marginalization (Gordon, 1994). Gordon seeks to break down what she perceives as a binary of single women as ‘old maids’ unable to find a partner or ‘modern’ single women who ‘choose’ to be alone, to provide a more fluid conceptualization which moves between and beyond such categorizations. The study is focused on how women *perceive* their status, in line with my focus, yet Gordon collapses non-marginality with postfeminist themes of independence, autonomy, self-reliance and individualization. Gordon positions ‘independence and autonomy’ as markers of non-marginality, which unhelpfully reduces marginality to a limited understanding. Wilkinson’s queer theory-informed analysis looks at how single people experience intimacy outside heteronormative coupledness and the nuclear family unit (Wilkinson, 2014). This inspires my approach, which examines how subjectivities are constructed not just at the individual level but intersubjectively and through alternative relationship formations (see Chapter 2.3.2 below).

Another set of important questions that have animated research on lived experience of singledom looks at how stigma is experienced in relation to wider social norms beyond individual interaction, and how this shapes identity formation. Simpson’s analysis of in 37 women in the UK looks at singleness and self-identity using Goffman’s conceptualization of stigma as produced and negotiated through social interaction (Simpson, 2016b, p. 388). Simpson argues that partnership status is becoming decentralized in the self-identities of single women, focusing on what she terms ‘positive’ single self-identities and how they are established in opposition to negative/stigmatizing ones. However, Simpson’s analysis is limited by the way it establishes a binary between positive and negative single identities, which risks reducing single subjectivities into value-laden, individualising terms. In her sociological study of middle-class, middle-aged US women, Ellen Trimberger argues that post age 35, a ‘new single woman’ emerges who can ‘discard’ the stigma encountered within the social and cultural context to reach a position of acceptance: ‘New single women during their thirties, forties, and sometimes into their fifties create the structures that support a viable single life before they are able to ... discard the cultural ideal of the couple as the only route to happiness.’ (Trimberger, 2006, p. xiii).

A handful of scholars have challenged the stigmatization/resistance binary to offer a more diverse and nuanced analysis which blurs such a boundary, conceptualizing both sides of the binary as occurring simultaneously in different ways within particular single subjectivities and it is this which I would like to take further (See Chapter 2.5.2 for full discussion). A key example is Lewis and Moon’s study which combines a qualitative analysis of interview data with quantitative survey data to conclude that older single women aged 30-65 held an *ambivalent* stance towards their single subjectivity (Lewis & Moon, 1997). They argue that single women’s narratives both drew upon postfeminist themes of freedom and autonomy as liberatory, but also worked to position singledom as being a status for which they were ‘self-accountable’ and at times was characterized by feelings of loss.

### 2.3.2 Alternative relationship formations: sites of resistance?

Instead of considering resistance within the framework of stigma, resistance is more radically explored in relation to the **alternative relationship formations** of single women. Several studies have argued that those relationships outside the hetero-coupled familial norm, such as friendship and broader kinship and care networks, may provide sites for more diverse and liberatory constructions of feminine subjectivity (Cronin, 2015; McCann & Allen, 2018; Roseneil, 2004; Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004; Simpson, 2003; Wilkinson, 2014). Simpson's feminist analysis of interviews with 37 white heterosexual single women in the UK argues that they decentre heteronormative relationships in favour of friendship and wider kinship networks and are 'released from traditional heterosexual scripts' (Simpson, 2006, p. 5.4). Yet, while Simpson briefly acknowledges that such shifts still lack cultural representation, the study fails to consider the *consequences* of such a lack of cultural representation and the impact of such a disparity on single women, something which I want to address. While not examining femininity explicitly, Budgeon's comprehensive sociological study of how individuals make sense of their personal networks draws upon feminist theory to analyse self-narratives of single people in relation to self-identity formation (Budgeon, 2006). Her account illuminates the multiple and complex social connections that make up single subjectivities. I am inspired by Budgeon's approach, building on this to see whether diverse social connections work as a form of resistance to stigmatised understandings of single women as socially isolated, or not.

### 2.4 Lived experience and media representation

As outlined in Chapter 2.1, there is a lack of literature which examines the lived experience of single women in relationship to media representations (See also Chapter 3.1). Research largely focuses on how single women negotiate what is argued are predominantly stigmatizing constructions of single femininity. For example, Zajicek and Koski's sociological study asks how single people negotiate and resist 'stigmatising' media depictions (Zajicek & Koski, 2003, p. 381). The study usefully employs a social constructionist analysis of how self-narratives of identity are constructed and shaped by the social, historical context, including media. However, it assumes media to be homogenously stigmatizing, rather than being attentive to whether more alternative constructions exist. Research by Pickens and Braun carried out a critical realist analysis of single woman's accounts of singledom, which drew on episodes of the TV show *The Bachelor*. Yet the show was only used as a prompt during interviews to discuss norms of femininity and female sexuality, so it did not fully explore how women understand such representations in relation to their single subjectivity. In contrast to many studies, Pickens and Braun argue that single women's narratives contain *both* a complicity with and resistance to gendered norms of femininity which construct singledom as undesirable (Pickens & Braun, 2018). I find this useful because it does not situate single femininities within a binary of resistant/non-resistant and understands that both can occur simultaneously, allowing for a complex conceptualization of femininity. The study

is somewhat limited by its failure to consider intersections of gender with other identity categories such as race and class, nor does it directly consider the representations themselves or how women negotiated them.

As discussed, the majority of research examining representations and women's lived experience approach it from a sociological or discursive psychology-based perspective. By contrast, Lia et al's study of how singles discursively negotiate advertising discourses is particularly useful as it draws on gender and psychoanalytical theory. But it is limited by its individualized, deterministic approach which sees representations as something which are simply 'responded' to. Lia et al describe popular representations as linguistic 'interpretive resources' which are used to frame accounts of singleness (Lai et al., 2015). Applying the concept of fantasy, Lai et al argue that identifications are formed *between* the individual and the cultural imaginary through abjectifying fantasies of singledom. Yet while the study draws on gender and sexuality theories, it didn't explicitly focus on how singledom itself is gendered.

Moving beyond the stigmatization debates, some studies of media and lived experience have claimed that there is a significant gap between identities within popular cultural representations and how single women make sense of their lives. Jan Macvarish argues that while media representations of single women have become more 'positive', such positivity is limited to younger women. Representations were found to be predominantly reductive, offering limited opportunities for identification with what were largely narrow media portrayals. Macvarish argues that lived experience of singledom is less homogenous, but more problematic (Macvarish, 2006), taking a sociological perspective to argue that women *respond* to identities available in the public sphere to construct a public identity which is separate from 'an internal sense of self' (Macvarish, 2006, p. 6). This sees the individual as a subject who can act outside of the cultural discourses within which she is located. As a consequence, Macvarish makes an optimistic assessment of women's negotiation of such 'identities', suggesting that single women are able to distance themselves from these cultural identities.

In this chapter I have so far discussed how single femininity has been constructed both historically and in the contemporary cultural context. I have then contrasted this with research into lived experience and examined what has already been claimed within the few studies which have looked at singledom at the cultural and the individual level. I now outline how I draw on, depart from and contribute to this scholarship through my conceptual framework.

## **2.5 Conceptual Framework**

### **2.5.1 The relationship between lived experience and media representations**

As I argue above, existing research often fails to adequately understand the relationship between cultural representations and lived experience and interrogate how representations are *negotiated* within everyday

life. In this section I explain how I address this critical lacuna and develop a deeper understanding of how women encounter, negotiate and respond to cultural representations of single femininity.

Unlike much of the existing research on the lived experience of single women, which comes from a critical discursive psychology or phenomenological approach, I am not focused on subjectivity from a psychological, individualized perspective. Instead I use psychosocial theory to examine how subjectivity is equally constitutive *by* and *of* the social, in line with my focus on cultural representations *as well as* self-narratives of lived experience, and the relationship between the two (See Chapter 3.3) (Butler, 1997, p. 66). I also use the lens of fantasy to deepen our understanding of how women negotiate cultural discourses in their lived experience at the psychic level. I am inspired by Pickens and Braun's social constructionist understanding of identity as constructed and shaped by the social, historical context within which they are located, *including* media, and intersected by multiple identity positions.

Existing scholarship has often presented single people as rejecting *or* accepting media representations of singledom (Macvarish, 2006; Trimberger, 2006; Zajicek & Koski, 2003). For example, Macvarish suggests single women negotiate regulatory 'cultural identities' of singledom by actively *choosing* to distance themselves from them (Macvarish, 2006). I depart from approaches which construct the single woman as a resistant subject who acts *separately* from the cultural discourses within which she is located and can simply 'discard' stigmas encountered in the social and cultural realm. I instead employ a psychosocial theorisation of these two spheres as being mutually constitutive of subjectivity rather than as separate, (Butler, 1997, p. 66), and as always operating within and through the social and cultural rather than 'outside' these locations. Drawing on Judith Butler's psychosocial theory of subject formation, I conceptualise the subject as being formed *between* the social realm and the individual psyche, rather than as a pre-existing subject who *then* 'interiorises' the social (Butler, 1997). My psychosocial understanding of subjectivity thus regards the subject as being productively formed at the very moment in which the regulatory 'social' norm is agentially interiorised within the psyche, and not before. Psychosocial theory importantly lets me understand how subjectivity is formed through the meeting of the cultural realm *and* the individual psychic realm – and it is this conjuncture which I am fundamentally interested in. I therefore theorise cultural discourses as deeply intertwined within individual subjectivity formation in complex ways (Foucault, 1982).

I have been inspired by Lai et al's study which argues identifications are formed *between* the individual and the cultural imaginary through abjectifying fantasies of singledom (Lai et al., 2015). I similarly consider self-narratives of single women as constituting the boundaries of heteronormative feminine subjectivity, drawing on Butler's theory of the heterosexual matrix to argue that their liminal positioning offers the potential to alter or reconfigure such boundaries. As above, I depart from Lai et al's psychoanalytical, individualised approach by taking a psychosocial understanding of subjectivity. I conceptualize single subjectivities in relation to how they sustain or challenge gendered binaries and

structures of power rather than *only* self-understandings of singledom. I counter their idea that representations are ‘interpretive resources’ through which individuals linguistically frame their understandings of singledom (Lai et al., 2015, p. 1567). I instead consider how single women actively and agentially construct fantasies of singledom, rather than ‘use’ those in cultural representations. I go further to consider what alternative, perhaps pleasurable, fantasies of singledom women construct and how these depart from, while never fully escaping from, cultural fantasies of singledom.

To examine the relationship between media representations and single women, I explore how the mediated figure of the single woman is experienced and negotiated within single women’s self-narratives of lived experience<sup>10</sup>. I will consider how cultural discourses shape individuals’ understandings of single femininity, and how they respond to particular discourses. For example, I will build on analysis of how the professionalized single ‘career woman’ is constructed within representations as both a liberated agentic, choosing subject *and* overly independent, and ‘lacking’ personal success and fulfillment. Such discourses position the professional single woman as using her freedom to make an ‘incorrect’ personal choice and stigmatises her ‘choices’. I will consider how single women negotiate these irreconcilable positionings and to what effect, how they experience such incitements to choose and whether they comply and/or counter them.

### **2.5.2 Regulation and resistance**

In considering how women experience their single femininity and negotiate cultural discourses, I aim to move beyond existing research on lived experience of singledom which constructs single subjectivities in a binary logic of being either regulated, often through stigmatisation, or as ‘resistant’ (See Section 2.3.1 and Section 2.4). I will instead contribute towards a more nuanced understanding of stigma/resistance as complex and ambivalent, containing at times *both* complicity with, *and* resistance to, such regulation, by drawing on a Butlerian psychosocial understanding of subjectivity. My approach sees resistance as troubling, or perhaps only *potentially* troubling gendered power structures. I also conceptualise resistance as occurring at *either* the individual or the collective level or both, and potentially in different ways.

#### *Regulation*

While there is a large body of work examining how single femininity is produced through discourses of regulation, particularly self-regulation, in media representations, I will address whether there are also themes of self-regulation within lived experience narratives. I build on Bay-Chen and Goodkind’s US

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<sup>10</sup> Self-narrative, while having a broad range of interpretations, is considered here as the active construction of subjectivity through the linking of life events (Gergen & Gergen, 1997; Reynolds et al., 2007).

study which examines how neoliberal discourses of self-responsibility, choice and agency intersect with class to govern or liberate single femininities in different ways (Bay-Cheng & Goodkind, 2016). I also ask if self-regulatory discourses appear under the guise of apparently more ‘liberatory’ discourse of choice, agency, autonomy and independence, or in ways which challenge gender and class power structures.

I will go further to consider how self-surveillance and self-transformation work as themes under the guise of apparently resistant discourses of agency and ‘choice’ in a postfeminist context. I will investigate whether discourses of agency actually regulate single femininity in misogynistic and stigmatizing ways and obscure how differences of class, race, age and sexuality may circumscribe such ‘freedoms’. I will also consider how temporal discourses govern single female subjectivity in regulatory ways, building on Lahad’s analysis of media representations of singledom (Lahad, 2016b). Lahad argues that discourses of temporality inform those of self-regulation and choice in a double regulation, where single women are required to urgently, actively ‘stop waiting’ and ‘choose’ coupledness to ‘progress’ (Lahad, 2016b). I will consider how women respond to or perhaps challenge these regulatory temporal discourses.

### *Stigmatisation and resistance*

My study moves beyond existing binary conceptualizations of singledom as stigmatised/non-stigmatised. I consider self-narratives of singledom as potentially constructing *both* a stigmatised positioning and resistance to stigma or moving between or outside of both. I draw on Goffman’s understanding of stigma as arising from the possession of a deeply discrediting or ‘defiling’ attribute (Goffman, 1963, pp. 13, 17). However, I depart from Goffman’s social psychologist perspective which conceptualizes identity at the individual and interpersonal level. Instead, as I explained earlier, I take a psychosocially-informed understanding of subjectivity as discursively constructed and as deeply intersected across social categories of race, class, sexuality and embodiment (See Chapter 2.5.1, and Chapter 1.2).

My approach is attentive to the presence or absence of stigma at the level of cultural *and* lived experience and I do not conceptualise media representations as homogenously stigmatizing. I challenge the binary of stigmatisation or resistance by conducting a more complex and nuanced analysis of how single femininities are constructed in ways which may involve women’s complicity *and* resistance, as per Pickens & Braun (Pickens & Braun, 2018). My study does not categorise self-identities, as per Simpson’s study which reductively divides single identities into ‘positive’ ones (Simpson, 2016a, p. 388), such as socially connected and independent, in opposition to what are categorized as ‘negative’ or stigmatized ones, such as over independence (also Bay-Cheng & Goodkind, 2016). I instead argue that such constructions may be experienced simultaneously in conflicting or ambivalent ways. I also move beyond a binary of stigma/resistance, by instead examining how discourses establish and/or blur the boundaries

of femininity to construct the single female subject as stigmatised or not, and to what effect.

### *Marginalisation and resistance*

Building on theoretical accounts of stigmatisation and the marginalisation of single femininity (Gordon, 1994), I will consider how the liminal positioning of the single woman at the very margins of femininity perhaps opens up spaces for resistance. While my research is not centred on alternative relationship formations, I draw on studies of single women's intimate relationships outside the hetero-coupled family norm which argue that alternative relations *may* work as a form of resistance. I will highlight not only how alternative relationship formations have been obscured at the cultural level, but explore the potentially harmful consequences for single women's subjectivities.

Importantly I also seek to explore the opportunities alternative relationship formations may offer, not only to resist or counter the stigmatisation of single female subjectivity but to challenge this binary and open up new understandings. For example, I ask if marginalising, stigmatising tropes of social isolation, deviancy and mental instability perhaps offer up spaces for more diverse configurations of single femininity which challenge gendered structures in transformative ways. Drawing on Perez Valverde (Valverde, 2009), who argues in her media analysis that the marginal social positioning of single women raises possibilities for challenging patriarchal structures, I will remain attentive to such breaks.

I aim to contribute to debates on the transformative potential of constructions of single femininity as deviant – particularly through discourses of sexual promiscuity. I will ask whether discourses of deviancy constitute a postfeminist 'double entanglement' where feminist discourses of single female sexual liberation are invoked only to be revoked in favour of resecuring regulatory discourses of race and class privilege (Negra, 2004) Yet I will also consider whether marginalising discourses of promiscuity *simultaneously* offer the potential for the subversion of or resistance to patriarchal, heteronormative constructions of single femininities.

Unlike Gordon (1994), whose study of single women aligns non-marginality with themes of choice, independence, autonomy, self-reliance and individualization, I depart from an understanding of marginality as *always* being stigmatised. While building on Gordon's fluid conceptualization of subjectivity, I move beyond this to uncouple stigma from marginality and themes of agency and choice and seek to identify a broader range of single subjectivities. I ask whether marginalised positionings might actually challenge gender hierarchies or perhaps offer opportunities for transformation.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

Overall, there has been a significant lack of literature on how the single woman has been constructed within popular cultural representations, with more attention being given to single femininity within

psychological, therapeutic, economic and policy-based discourses. Yet her representation in US and UK popular cultural media has received more scholarly attention than the lived experiences of single women. Thus, a critical lacuna exists not only in relation to the question of how the figure of the single woman emerges within the contemporary *cultural* moment, but also in how women construct and negotiate single subjectivities in their everyday lives.

Current scholarship on the popular cultural representation of single women in the contemporary US-UK context indicates that abjectifying and stigmatising historical tropes of deviancy, social isolation, mental instability persist, alongside a reinvigoration of themes of self-surveillance, professionalisation and hypersexualisation. Yet there is significant debate on the extent to which the single woman has been reconfigured within a postfeminist cultural context. While scholars agree that she is still constructed as deviant, isolated and mentally unstable in multiple ways, a more careful investigation as to how such stigmatising discourses intersect with other identity categories is necessary to identify not only the deeply regulatory but also the perhaps more transformatory ways in which such a reconfiguration is occurring.

Having placed her contemporary construction in historical context in this chapter, I will consider how processes of abjection both establish *and* trouble the boundaries of contemporary femininity in ways which, following Butler, may open up potentially liberatory, liminal spaces of resistance (Butler, 1997). I will also speak to these debates by considering whether discourses of promiscuity and deviance may offer potential for the subversion of patriarchal, heteronormative constructions of single femininities.

Much of the limited research examining the diverse and complex lived experience of single women does so from the perspective of critical discursive psychology or phenomenological analysis, which conceptualises subjectivity formation as a psychological, individualised process. I aim to move beyond this individualised approach, by taking a psychosocial theorisation to investigate how individual subjectivities are mutually co-constituted *of* and *by* the social. I ask how such encounters actively constitute and produce single feminine subjectivity rather than conceptualise representations as stigmatizing discourses that women simply respond to or act ‘outside’ of.

Stigmatisation and the ways in which single femininities are abjected, is a significant theme within the literature on single women’s lived experience. While debates are beginning to shift beyond the binary of stigma and resistance, I build on limited research in this area to trouble such a binary further. I will conduct a more complex and nuanced analysis of how single femininities are constructed in ways which may involve women’s complicity *and* resistance. Drawing on Butler, I offer a more nuanced conceptualization of how processes of stigmatisation and marginalisation blur the boundaries of femininity in ways which may be both regulatory and transformative, particularly in relation to alternative relationship formations (Butler, 1997).



Finally, my approach aims to offer a deeper understanding of how cultural representations of single femininity are negotiated within the self-narratives of single women in the UK and importantly what the consequences are for single women's lived experience of singledom. As I have argued, this is an investigation which has been inadequately approached by current literature on single feminine subjectivities. I also build on an intersectional understanding of feminine subjectivities as constructed and shaped by the complex social, cultural and historical context within which they are located.

To recall, based on this conceptual grounding, my analysis is guided by two main research questions:

RQ1 What fantasies do contemporary cultural representations of the single woman mobilise?

RQ2 How are these fantasies negotiated within women's self-narratives of single subjectivity?

Building on this conceptual framework, in the next chapter, Chapter 3, I explain how these questions will be addressed through my theoretical framing.

## Chapter 3. Theoretical framework: Discourse, the psychosocial and fantasy

### 3.1 Introduction

As discussed in Chapter 1, I am concerned with how single femininity is being discursively constructed in contemporary Anglo-American popular culture and lived experience. Current scholarship suggests that there is a lack of diversity within cultural representations, which are often narrowly constructed through historical and postfeminist tropes. Existing studies also indicate that the experiences of single women are by comparison highly diverse, complex and multifaceted. I am therefore interested in whether a deep *tension* exists between such cultural representations and the experiences of what are increasing numbers of single women in UK society. Finally, I would like to know how cultural representations of single femininity are experienced and negotiated by single woman and what affect this has on their gendered subjectivity. My analysis is therefore guided by two main research questions: RQ1. What fantasies do contemporary cultural representations of the single woman mobilise? RQ 2. How are these fantasies negotiated within women's self-narratives of single subjectivity?

To answer these questions, I start by taking a Foucauldian understanding of subjectivity as discursively produced and disciplined through regimes of power. I build on this to examine how discourses at *both* the level of representation and lived experience work to construct and regulate single female subjectivities. I also think with Butler's psychosocial theory of subjectivity formation to understand how the subject is both constitutive *of* and *by* the social (Butler, 2011, p. 3). Butler's theory invites a more nuanced conceptualisation of the *psychic* processes of subjectivity and how it is formed *between* the psyche and the social realm, with which I am concerned. Further, my approach does not see the individual subject as acting separately from discourse, nor does it see regulation as externally *imposed* from the outside. Instead I consider social regulation as agentially and *actively* engaged with, and by, the subject at the psychic level, forming the boundary between the interior and exterior by which the subject is co-constituted (Butler, 1997, p. 66). I therefore contribute towards a deeper understanding of how the interiority of the subject is formed.

I also take an intersectional stance to subjectivity, which argues that the marginalisation of gender cannot be examined in isolation from other identity categories of race, class, sexuality and age, and to do so could further obscure multiple forms of inequalities (Crenshaw, 1989). This lets me better understand how relationships of power work to hierarchise single femininity subjectivities across multiple identity categories and social locations in divergent and complex ways. I will use this to ask whether and how these intersections work politically to sustain or challenge gendered binaries and structures of power.

As discussed in Chapter 2, I also depart from the majority of lived experience studies which conceptualise the construction of subjectivity from a discursive psychology perspective as a psychological, individualised process. My discursive, psychosocial theorisation of subjectivity therefore seeks to overcome the often binary construction of single subjectivities within the literature on lived experience as being either stigmatised *or* as resisting such stigmatisation. I instead use this theorisation to identify how the construction of such a binary itself works to trouble the boundaries of feminine subjectivity, or not (Butler, 2011, p. 3). My approach also offers a more fluid conceptualisation of how discourses of single subjectivity may construct *both* a stigmatised positioning and resistance to such stigma, or movement between or outside of such positionings.

There is a limited body of work which theorises subjectivity formation in relation to the cultural realm and the ways women encounter and negotiate cultural representations in lived experience. Within feminist media scholarship, there has been a dominance of text-based analysis since the 1990s, as opposed to a focus on the practices and social context of how texts are consumed within lived experience (Grindstaff & Press, 2014; Orgad, 2016). Equally, Grindstaff and Press argue that feminist sociology has tended to ignore media as an object of study (Grindstaff & Press, 2014). However, there is now growing feminist media scholarship on the relationship between mediated discourses and subjectivity. Janice Radway's early ethnographic study, *Reading the Romance* (Radway, 1984), was pioneering in how it positioned women's everyday reading practices in relation to their social and material contexts. Radway drew on psychoanalytic theory to explore how romance novels engaged with women's desires at the psychic level. While I take a psychosocial rather than psychoanalytical framing, I build on her theorisation that women's engagement with texts is shaped by the social and historical context within which they are positioned. I do not take an explicitly psychoanalytical approach because this would confine my analysis to an individualised perspective, and would not allow me to explore how the collective, social realm – beyond the individual psyche – is also implicated within the formation of feminine subjectivity. Drawing on psychoanalysis does however provide a way to explore of how desire is implicated in subjectivity formation at the cultural and individual psychic level, which is a fundamental aspect of intimate life (see Chapter 3.3 below).

More recently, multiple studies have looked at how women construct their gendered subjectivity directly in relation to *specific* media texts or sites (Dobson, 2011; Dobson, 2014, 2015; Press, 2011; Ringrose, 2009; Ringrose et al., 2013; Sanders, 2007). However instead of taking an audience-based, reader-response or ethnographic approach which directly explores the reception or use of media, I examine how single women's subjectivities are produced through and shaped by cultural representations in more indirect and intangible ways (Gill & Scharff, 2011; Orgad, 2016). My approach allows for closer attention to how intimate, personal lives are conditioned by and may reshape cultural stories (Orgad, 2020b) and the complex ways representational patterns are configured on the ground, *beyond* the text

(O'Neill, 2020). Several studies have examined how neoliberal and postfeminist mediated subjectivities have arisen within everyday talk amongst young women; but these do not directly reference particular media texts (Jackson & Vares, 2011; Jackson, Vares, & Gill, 2013; Kim, 2011; Scharff, 2016). For example Christina Scharff asks how the discursive gendered subjectivity of the 'entrepreneur' emerges within everyday talk by female musicians (Scharff, 2016). While Scharff doesn't analyse representations of entrepreneurialism, her account is useful as she draws on a Butlerian psychosocial approach to account for how psychic lives and subjectivities are shaped by cultural discourses.

I am particularly inspired by Jackson and Vares who interviewed young teens about celebrity figures in popular culture (Jackson & Vares, 2011). Their analysis traces how girls formed gendered subjectivities through their use of the term 'slut' when discussing celebrity representations. I similarly take a poststructuralist approach which sees interview data as simultaneously productive of, and produced by, discourses of feminine subjectivity, yet I more closely juxtapose this with analysis of media representations. In a study which is closer to my topic, Kim explored how mediated constructions of single femininity were discursively taken up by married women in Korea. The figure of the 'Missy' – meaning a married woman who looks unmarried – first appeared in an advertising campaign and was widely embraced by married women, who constructed themselves through this desirable feminine subjectivity (Kim, 2011). Kim argues that the concept provided a discursive space for articulation of alternative desires, one which women agentically chose to take up or resist. While I find Kim's approach of conceptualising representations as appealing to desires at the psychic level and perhaps opening spaces for resistance, I take a psychosocial framing of subjectivity (see below).

As detailed in Chapter 2, the current empirical work on single women's lived experience often suggests that single women simply *respond* to or choose to *reject or discard* cultural representations which they encounter and are able to act 'outside' the cultural context. I take a more nuanced approach to subjectivity formation by drawing on fantasy as a conceptual lens to consider how single women may identify with fantasies or not, at the psychic level, rather than simply 'respond' to or *choose* to resist or reject media representations. I use fantasy to analyse how single femininities are discursively constructed in ways which may involve women's concurrent complicity *and* resistance. I also consider how single women may actively construct *alternative* fantasies of singledom within their self-narratives of lived experience.

Finally, as I have outlined in Chapter 1, there is significant debate surrounding the extent to which the figure of the single woman has been *reconfigured* in what has been defined as a postfeminist contemporary cultural context (See Chapter 1.4). Therefore my study contributes to such debates by identifying how postfeminist discourses are circulating at the cultural *and* individual level and how they are working to reinscribe, reconfigure or perhaps transform single feminine subjectivities.

I will now discuss in more depth why I am using each of these theoretical building blocks, and how they are understood and employed.

### **3.2 The discursive production of subjectivity**

My thesis seeks to understand how single subjectivities are being discursively produced and disciplined through gendered regimes of power in a postfeminist culture. I therefore draw on Michel Foucault's theory of subjectivity as being produced through discourses of power (Foucault, 1988). Importantly, Foucault's theory conceives of discourse as being both a site of power *and* resistance. Foucault conceptualizes power as a *relationship* between people requiring the existence of the 'other': 'the other (the one over whom power is exercised) is recognised... as a subject who acts; and that faced with a relationship of power, a whole field of responses... may open up,' who can *respond* to the exercise of power, (Foucault, 1982, p. 789). I use this to identify not only how gendered discourses may regulate single subjectivities but also, following a feminist tradition, how single subjectivities are formed relationally through power. I ask how they may be agentially negotiated, constructed in *opposition* to or in *response* to the dominant normative discourses of femininity. A Foucauldian approach also highlights how power and resistance operate in subtle ways at the everyday level, and how subjectivity is being produced and regulated intersubjectively through relations *between* subjects, (Devault, 1990, p. 231; Foucault, 1982; Hey, 2002). I apply this to analyse how subjectivity formation occurs through relations of power within the everyday lived experience and interpersonal relationships of single women.

Femininity in postfeminist culture has been theorised as an intensified form of individual self-surveillance and transformation (Gill, 2009a) (See Chapter 1.4). Therefore Foucault's concept of 'technologies of the self' helps me to consider singledom as a technology of the self, that is, a set of practices through which subjectivity is discursively produced. As Foucault defines it: 'individuals effect by their own means a certain number of operations on their own bodies, souls, thoughts, conduct and ways of being, so as to transform themselves to attain a certain state,' (Foucault, 1988, p. 17). I use this theorisation to understand acts of self-surveillance and transformation as producing single feminine subjectivity. Technologies of the self are always drawn from a particular cultural and social context: 'These practices are ... not something that the individual invents... They are patterns ... that he [sic] finds within his culture, his [sic] society and his [sic] social group,' (Foucault, 1988, p. 17). Singledom is therefore considered a technology of the self insofar as it incorporates a consideration of how single subjectivities may be constructed through, but not determined by, cultural discourses and representations. I thus argue that cultural constructions of single subjectivities operate as technologies of the self, inviting us to rethink how cultural texts, such as magazines, film, and television, incite readers to change or transform themselves and may work to regulate single feminine subjectivities. I will use this

to look at how discourses of self-transformation may be employed in contemporary representations and self-narratives, and examine how these regulate, reconfigure or perhaps transform female subjectivities. I also draw on Foucault to conceptualise subjectivity as produced through *multiple* discourses, sources and positionings, rather than there being a singular, 'authentic' self. This provides a way of identifying where there is perhaps contestation, complexity and reversals within representations and self-narratives of subjectivity (Ransom, 1997, p. 130).

Yet, feminist and cultural scholars have suggested that Foucault's theorisation of subjectivity provides an overly deterministic conceptualisation of the subject, where femininity is imposed through gendered structures of power on 'inert' or 'docile bodies' (Deveaux, 1994, p. 225; Hekman, 1996, p. 218; McNay, 1992, p. 71). Indeed Stuart Hall critiques Foucault and calls for a more nuanced conceptualisation of how the psyche is implicated within the relationship of the subject to discourse (Hall, 1996, p. 14). By acknowledging the role of the individual in subjectivity formation in his later conceptualisations, Foucault thus incorporates a greater element of agency which helps me to consider how individuals more *actively* encounter and negotiate media representations. However, Wells argues that, while a subject may be self-choosing, they can only choose from the range of subjectivities present in their social and cultural context and that cultural discourses 'determine the very boundaries of thought' (Wells, 2011, p. 89). I build upon this more nuanced theorisation to consider what the cultural boundaries of single subjectivities are, to what extent individuals draw upon and are incited by cultural discourses, and to what extent they construct *alternative* single subjectivities.

But such constructions and encounters cannot be examined in isolation. A Foucauldian approach to subjectivity highlights how such discourses are always socially and historically located, and acknowledges that subjectivities are shaped by the multiple, broader social structures within which they are situated. This informs my interest in how social locations shape single subjectivities at the cultural *and* individual level. I am particularly inspired by Jill Reynolds' discursive study of single woman's lived experience, which underscores how the term 'single' can only be understood in its particular social and historical location (Reynolds, 2008). Reynolds uses Foucault to argue that the 'social history, social practices around singleness construct different sets of identity possibilities,' (Reynolds, 2008, pp. 19–20). I similarly apply Foucault to theorise how discursive accounts of single feminine subjectivities are historically and socially grounded as well as regulated by multiple intersecting positionings, such as race, class, age, sexuality, disability, nationality and ethnicity (Crenshaw, 1989) (See Chapter 3.4, below). And while I will look for examples of agency and resistance, I also want to examine how agency may be limited or enabled by the social positionings of single women across multiple identity categories in order to examine how subjectivities are being hierarchised (Deveaux, 1994, p. 233).

Finally, Foucault conceptualises discourses as *producing* power relations, and as continually mutable and shifting (Foucault, 1982). This provides me with a nuanced sense of how contradictions and inconsistencies may occur within discursive texts (Ransom, 1997, p. 82). It draws attention to how a text may simultaneously produce regulatory effects *and* contain competing counter or alternative discourses. Deveaux suggests a feminist approach to Foucault's conceptualization of power must also incorporate a more subjective approach of how women *experience* power more deeply at the inner level. More specifically it is necessary to know whether technologies of the self are experienced as being self-regulatory *or* as transformative (Deveaux, 1994, p. 236). I build on this to argue that one way to provide a richer understanding of how regulatory discourses and technologies of the self are experienced by single women is by incorporating a psychosocial theorisation of subjectivity, which takes fantasy and *desire* as an analytical lens, concepts that are discussed further in Section 3.3 and 3.4, below.

### **3.3 A psychosocial approach to subjectivity**

While I draw primarily upon a Foucauldian conceptualisation of subjectivity as being discursively constructed, the second building block of my framework is a psychosocial theorisation of subjectivity, which enhances my enquiry into the role of agency within gendered subject formation (Hekman, 1996, p. 218). In particular, a psychosocial position lets me attend to the desires, pleasures and emotions which are fundamental to experiences of intimate life and subjectivity formation with which I'm concerned (Walkerline, 1984, p. 165). Incorporating a psychosocial approach centres subjectivity as an active and *desiring* process which is produced through discourses of power at the social and individual psychic level. Psychosocial theory also offers consideration of how discourses of single femininity circulate at the subconscious *and* conscious level, informing an exploration of how collective, subconscious fantasies at the cultural level are incorporated and negotiated at the conscious *and* subconscious level of the individual psyche.

Building upon a Foucauldian regulatory understanding of subjectivity as produced through discourses of power, in *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler argues that the subject is constructed through an 'interiorisation' of the regulatory force of the social norm, and that there is no subject without a process of subjectification (Butler, 1997, p. 66). Yet, importantly, Butler does not regard social regulation as externally *imposed* from the outside, but as being *actively engaged* with by the subject, forming the very boundary between the interior and exterior of the subject. While the subject is seen to 'capitulate' to the regulatory force of the social category through which it is formed, it is equally constitutive *by* and *of* the social: 'It is the site at which the social implicates the psychic in its very formation,' (Butler, 1997, p. 66). I use this to examine how subjectivities are constructed not only at the individual level but *between* the psychic and the cultural level, as a *relational* and *historical* process in conjunction with the social, rather than solely an individual process.

I am also concerned with how emotion and **desire** are involved within subjectivity formation; Butler's theory draws on psychoanalysis, to argue that desire is implicated within the individual's subjection to power. 'The attachment to subjection is produced through the workings of power, and that part of the operation of power is made clear in the psychic effect, one of the most insidious of its productions,' (Butler, 1997, p. 6). This opens up a way to conceptualise how subjects are implicated in their own subject formation, as well as within gendered social structures, through the powerful effects of *desire*. It illuminates the invisible ways in which power can take hold at the deepest subconscious level where the individual is incited and compelled to actively engage in their own subjugation. I use this to consider the incredibly deep, powerful and perhaps very painful ways in which women are caught up in gendered discourses of singledom at the psychic level.

While a psychoanalytical approach sees processes of subjectification as operating both at the conscious and subconscious level, it also claims that the unconscious is primarily made up of fantasies (Skelton, 2006). Indeed it is suggested that unconscious fantasies and desires are also what structure our conscious thought: 'Unconscious fantasies are a more organised and organising psychic element than conscious fantasy, which is a *derivative* of unconscious fantasy,' (Akhtar, 2018, p. 105). Thus, I follow this psychosocial approach to investigate how fantasies and desires are operating subconsciously at the cultural level *and* within conscious articulations of self-narratives and how these are deeply implicated within women's subject formation (See Chapter 3.5 below for how fantasy is being conceptualised).

I build on Butler's theorisation of the 'heterosexual matrix' to analyse how certain gendered positions may be rendered **undesirable** or abjectedified through their *exclusion* from the process of subjectivity formation:

'This exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet 'subjects', but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject... Whose living under the sign of the "unlivable" is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject,' (Butler, 2011, p. 3).

I therefore extend the theory of the heterosexual matrix to analyse how discourses of singledom construct the boundaries of what constitutes the feminine subject. This invites me to consider the ways in which certain feminine subjectivities are rendered undesirable or marginal due to their single status and how they experience, negotiate and cope with such processes of abjectionification.

Yet, Butler argues that at the moment when normative social categories of identity are 'interiorised' within the psyche they are also made vulnerable to change, and hence potentially open to



**transformation** by the subject, both psychically and historically. ‘Being psychic, the norm does not merely reinstate social power, it becomes formative and vulnerable in highly specific ways,’ (Butler, 1997, p. 21). Thus, Butler’s theory of subjectivity as produced through a process of subjectification provides a contextualised, historicised account of how power is implicated but also how it may shift in these moments. Specifically, this informs my analysis of how desires surrounding fantasies of single femininity may operate in ways which constitute and regulate but *also* potentially transform or subvert gendered norms.

Having outlined why my study is informed by a psychosocial approach, I now move to discuss how Butler’s theory of performativity complements my framework. I draw on Butler’s suggestion that gender is *performatively* constructed, to contribute to a theorisation of performativity as operating at both the conscious *and* subconscious levels. Consistent with my discursive, psychosocial approach to subjectivity (outlined in Chapter 3.1 and 3.2), Butler sees gender as not originating from a pre-existing identity but as constituted through the repetition of certain culturally legible discursive formations:

‘Acts, gestures and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance... [they] are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means,’ (Butler, 1990, p. 185).

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that the boundaries of performative gestures are produced through the disciplinary ‘cultural orders that sanction the subject,’ (Butler, 1990, p. 134). Thus, Butler’s positioning opens up the discursive cultural sites surrounding singledom so that I can examine how they produce femininity as a coherent ‘identity’ category through the regulatory, repetitive operation of cultural norms. I use this to consider where and how performative repetitions of single femininity occur, or are disrupted, and with what regulatory effect.

Within this conceptualisation, the **psychic** formation of gender is also accounted for, which provides, alongside a discursive approach, a deeper exploration of gendered subjectivity at the psychic level. Butler argues that gender is performatively constructed not *only* the ‘exterior’ level of acts and gestures but also the ‘interior’ level:

‘That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constituted. This also suggests that if that reality is fabricated as an interior essence, that very interiority is an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse... an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation,’ (Butler, 1990, pp. 185–186).

Performativity is thus compatible with a psychosocial approach as it claims normative social categories of identity are ‘interiorised’ within the psyche. Yet I take this further to suggest that it constructs the notion of a gendered interiority *itself* as a regulatory effect. This provides me with a more complex way of exploring how gender is constructed as a psychic formation at the individual level.

Performativity also builds on my conceptualisation of subjectivity formation as involving fantasy (See Chapter 3.5 below). Drawing on Foucault’s suggestion of power as operating not as a form of repression but as a productive force, where subjects are ‘compelled’ to perform their gender, Butler claims that the performative construction of gender operates through a fantasmic *desire for* a coherent identification or stable gender identity: ‘According to the understanding of identification as an enacted fantasy or incorporation... it is clear that coherence is desired, wished for, idealised.’ (Butler, 1990, p. 136). I use this to consider how psychic desire for a stable identity is both the mechanism through which single femininity is discursively and actively produced by the subject, *and* the regulatory force through which it is policed.

In my analysis, I apply Butler’s question: ‘What kind of gender performance will enact and reveal the performativity of gender itself in a way which destabilises categories of identity and desire?’ (Butler, 1990, p. 189), to ask how single femininities are constructed through a fantasmic desire for a coherent ‘identity’. I also conceptualise singledom as a form of gendered performativity that performs but also simultaneously destabilises, threatens or undoes ‘normative’ femininity.

Butler’s theorisation of performativity as a **temporal** process also provides me with an agentic and transformative theorisation of how gendered subjectivities are produced in *tension* with regulatory norms. While the subject is compelled to repeat ‘stylised acts’ which construct a ‘stable’ gendered identity, with each temporally based repetition comes the *possibility* of disruption or alteration. Butler argues that disruption or failure in repetition is *necessary*, as there is no coherent ontological gendered identity upon which these acts are based:

‘The abiding gendered self will ... be shown to be structured by repeated acts that seek to approximate the ideal of a substantial ground of identity but which in their occasional *discontinuity* [will] reveal the temporal and contingent groundlessness of this “ground.” The possibilities of gender transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat,’ (Butler, 1990, p. 192).

Thus, not only is the momentary transformation of the cultural construction of gender norms made possible, it is *inevitable*. This provides me with a more transformative framing of how gender is constructed at the cultural and psychic level and attends to the inherent tension between agency and

regulation in the production of subjectivity. I draw on this theorisation to identify where there are breaks within the discursive repetition of femininity, and consider how this works to transform, or not, gendered power structures.

A central question of my study is not *only* how single femininity is produced, but how it is perhaps threatened or undone through transformative discontinuities or failures of repetition of femininity. I therefore use performativity to consider whether the figure of the single woman is a key site for the disruption of feminine norms at the same time as she simultaneously works to reinscribe normative constructions of femininity. I see these failures as *always* operating according to a particular positionality, and the implications operating in two different ways: failure as occurring either for the subject themselves (as identified within the self-narratives of single women) *and/or* as occurring at the cultural, collective level of the ideal feminine norm (as identified within popular cultural texts and within the self-narratives of single women). I also view these failures, rather than *always* being disruptive of the norm, as perhaps only potentially troubling the norm, while still allowing the norm to persist. Thus, my analysis considers how power operates in ways which may *both* challenge *and* ultimately reinstate the feminine norm. My focus on the temporal construction of gender also helps reveal how discursive constructions of gender norms may persist *and* necessarily *shift* within and across different moments, consistent with my focus on historically situating contemporary constructions of femininity.

To summarise, I am linking performativity to a psychosocial approach to examine how femininity is being fantasmically ‘performed’ through discursive gendered acts at both the conscious level, through the self-narratives of single woman, and how gender is being constructed through subconscious fantasies at the cultural *and* individual level. I am also incorporating an exploration of how regulatory norms of femininity may be performatively sustained but also simultaneously transformed, threatened or undone through discursive fantasies surrounding the single woman.

### **3.4 An intersectional approach to subjectivity**

The third building block of my theoretical framework is intersectional theory. An intersectional approach strengthens my investigation of how single female subjectivities are being discursively and performatively produced through gendered regimes of power in several ways. Intersectionality as a concept is grounded within a history of Black feminist scholarship which views oppression as operating systematically through the interconnection of identity categories (Crenshaw, 1989; Hill Collins, 2002, p. 18). Intersectional Black feminist scholarship has demonstrated that theorisations of gender which do *not* take race, class, age, sexuality, disability, nationality and ethnicity into account remain incomplete and partial. Such analyses fail to appropriately consider how complex systems of power work *together* to produce and regulate feminine subjectivities (Lorde, 1984). Following Kimberlé Crenshaw’s

theorisation, I argue that the marginalisation of gender cannot be examined in isolation from other identity categories, and to do so could further obscure multiple inequalities (Crenshaw, 1989).

An intersectional perception of singledom takes into consideration how, for example, the dominance and universality of representations of whiteness which typifies popular US and UK culture, work to structure, hierarchise and obscure single femininities in certain ways (Dyer, 1997). I apply an intersectional and historicised analysis to reveal how racial imbalance works in complex ways; simply the inclusion of other racial representations does not adequately counter the predominance of white representations or alter the structures of power which produce racial imbalances. For example Kimberley Springer, in her analysis of US films and TV programmes, argues that even when missing from the screen, the black woman is the counterpart *against* which white femininity is constructed (Springer, 2007). Similarly Carolyn West in her essay on developing an oppositional gaze towards representations of blackness, demonstrates that the overall absence of representations of African American woman in US contemporary culture means any oppressive images which do appear garner more weight as there are fewer positive or more realistic images to counter negative representations for viewers of *all* races (West, 2008, pp. 288, 294). I use an intersectional approach to take into account racial absences and inclusions, and to consider how gendered constructions work to sustain these racial hierarchies. I build on this to not just analyse how femininity is being constructed through the privileging of whiteness but to also ask how, in doing so, it also constructs blackness as ‘other’.

An intersectional perspective is important to examine not just how gender works with race but *also* how it works with class to hierarchise single femininities. I am inspired by West’s study, which highlights the importance that broader social, structural inequalities may have on how African American women experience stereotypical images of black women in the media. West describes the pressures American black women may feel to conform to the ‘Mammy’ image because of their class positioning, where they are expected to simultaneously work, run a household and contribute to their community, despite earning less and being more likely to be single mothers (Fuller, 2011; Hill Collins, 2002; West, 2008, p. 291). I am drawing on West in taking an intersectional, socially and culturally situated approach to consider the social positioning from which women experience contemporary representations. As bell hooks argues, while women of colour must adopt a resistant approach in their viewing to critique cultural representations, their ability to do so may be influenced by their own experience of discrimination in their daily life and their *collective* racial history (hooks, 1992, p. 127). I thus take into account the historical and social location of both the texts and the interviewees to consider how their location structures their discourses.

As discussed above, I am interested in whether feminine subjectivity is being *transformed* through discourses of singledom. Sociologist Beverly Skeggs has argued that working class women are located at

the limits of ‘respectability’ and therefore have the potential to transform femininity: ‘The value system of the middle class is not wholly accepted and ‘respectability’ has long been a site of struggle [for working class women]’ (Skeggs, 2013, p. 103). Thus an intersectional analysis offers a way to examine how class intersects with and deeply regulates femininity within media representations and lived experience (Allen, Tyler, & De Benedictis, 2014). I use it to consider whether working class femininities, located at the boundaries of respectability, deviancy and transformation, perhaps shift or reconfigure constructions of single femininity.

Intersectional theory has historically prioritised race, class and gender, but more recently it has been complicated to include identity categories such as age, sexuality, embodiment and disability (Lorde, 1984). As discussed in Chapter 1, feminist theorists have argued that contemporary Anglo-American popular culture with which I am concerned is highly postfeminist. Such critics argue that postfeminist representations of femininity – and specifically single femininity – largely privilege young, white, middle or upper class able-bodied, heteronormative femininity (Tasker & Negra, 2007, pp. 2; 7; Wilkes, 2015). I take an intersectional approach to build on such critiques and examine how identities, such as race, class and gender, but *also* sexuality, age, embodiment, disability and ethnicity, work together to hierarchise feminine subjectivities in varied ways within the contemporary postfeminist moment. This multiple-axis, intersectional approach strengthens and deepens my analysis of how single gendered subjectivities are being marginalised.

Finally, a Foucauldian approach to subjectivity conceptualises discourse as being socially and historically located across *multiple* networks of power. I therefore combine this with intersectional theory to examine how subjectivities are situated, constructed and produced across diverse, intersecting social and historical locations. For example, I will look at how the social positioning and social context within which women encounter cultural representations of singledom fundamentally shape their experiences. I also use this to account for the historical and social location both of the texts and the interview participants to consider how this structures their experiences and critiques.

In the next section I set out how my theoretical grounding outlined above is drawn together and applied through the conceptual lens of fantasy.

### **3.5 Fantasy as a conceptual lens**

As discussed, a psychosocial and intersectional conceptualisation of subjectivity invites us to examine the centrality of fantasy in the constitution of subjectivity. I use psychosocial theory to explore how subjectivity is constructed through fantasies at the individual psychic level *and* the cultural level. Fantasy offers a more complex way to consider subjectivity formation at the discursive level, which incorporates

desire. I use the concept to identify how fantasies work discursively to reinforce, subvert or challenge gendered power structures at *both* the cultural and individual level. In the following section I explain in detail how fantasy works through desire within the process of *identification* and how this connects the cultural and the individual level. I outline how fantasy operates ideologically to reinforce, subvert or challenge broader gendered power structures, and why it complements a discursive understanding of subjectivity. I use the concept of fantasy to address three main questions below: 1) how gendered fantasies of singledom within media representations construct and draw upon subconscious desires at the individual level as part of a process of *identification*; 2) how fantasy works *ideologically* to reinforce, subvert or challenge gendered power structures more broadly; 3) how I am incorporating fantasy alongside a *discursive* approach to subjectivity.

### 3.5.1 Fantasy as identification

I am inspired by a psychoanalytical approach, which highlights identity as being made up of multiple processes of **‘identification’** *through* fantasy. Identification, as theorised by psychoanalyst and psychosocial scholar Stephen Frosh, is a mechanism which involves the internalisation of the ‘other’ within the fantasy realm of the subconscious: ‘What psychoanalysis claims is that ... external stimuli... are “internalised”, taken in to be part of the mind, infecting its structure, and – most importantly – its unconscious contents,’ (Frosh, 2002, pp. 55–56). This definition therefore invites an analysis which takes into account how the ‘external’ cultural fantasies of self and ‘other’ are negotiated, ‘interiorised’ and experienced at the level of individual subjectivity.

To explore how the process of identification is *gendered* through fantasy, I primarily think with feminist film scholar Diana Fuss. Fuss conceptualises fantasy as a form of identification to argue that gender identities are made through fantasies of **displacement** – a *desire* to be in the place of the ‘other’ and to desire what the ‘other’ desires (Fuss, 1995, p. 8). This informs my examination of how fantasies of becoming the ‘other’ in self-narratives and in representations of singledom work to reinscribe power relations by constructing gendered single subjectivities as desirable or not. I use fantasy in the same way as Fuss to suggest that fantasies of the ‘other’ are constructed at the cultural level, and work by appealing to desires at the individual level, drawing together the two spheres. This conceptualization forms the basis of my analysis of how individual subjectivities are constructed through fantasies operating at the cultural level. For example, when analysing the self-narratives of single women, I will look for *who* individuals express a desire to become, or not become, and whether they differ, challenge or draw from fantasies in media representations. However, while employing Fuss, I am departing from a psychoanalytical approach to fantasy as I am interested in the construction of subjectivities *between and across* the cultural and psychological level through discourse.

Identification is treated in my study as a complex, ambivalent process which can simultaneously involve both desire for and a rejection of fantasies of femininity. In this context, Lauren Berlant's understanding of the female subject as being pleasurably attached to yet still critical of the culturally located desires which produce her disappointment is particularly productive (Berlant, 2008, p. 3). Berlant informs my consideration of how fantasies of single femininity produced in the collective realm of popular culture are taken up by the subject; where they feel ambivalent towards them, or even reject them and consider what effect this identification with cultural fantasies has on single femininities (Berlant, 2008, p. 6).

### 3.5.2 Fantasy and temporality

I not only explore how fantasies work as a form of identification, but I also consider how they operate through notions of temporality. I use this to conceptualise how fantasies of temporality may work **ideologically** to sustain gendered power structures. For example, Lauren Berlant uses the theory of 'cruel optimism' to describe this process. Cruel optimism is defined as a form of relation where something which is desired, for example, the fantasy of what constitutes 'the good life', is 'the obstacle to your flourishing,' (Berlant, 2011, p. 1). Berlant's cultural analysis takes the concept of temporality further to explore how a nostalgic fantasy of returning in the future to a fantasised past place of stability, which was never actually experienced, works ideologically to secure conservative, neoliberal political goals of economic participation and conventional forms of reproduction (Berlant, 2011, pp. 179–180).

Drawing on Berlant, I consider how fantasies of the past, present or future work ideologically to sustain or resist gendered power structures at both the individual and political, cultural level. I also examine how collective and individual fantasies of a return to the past, or of a particular envisioned future, work temporally to position certain subjectivities as being desirable, or undesirable. I extend Berlant's theory to consider how both collective and individual single subjectivities are constructed by drawing on fantasies surrounding notions of the past, present or future and how these intersect with multiple identity categories.

### 3.5.3 Fantasy and discourse

Fantasy is employed in this thesis *alongside* a **discursive** approach. As outlined in Chapter 3.3, I argue that fantasy is deeply implicated in subjectivity formation. Feminist scholars have long examined how girls' and women's desires have been regulated and disciplined through gendered power structures within popular culture (McRobbie, 2000; Walkerdine, 2001). As Stuart Hall argues, popular media representations 'mobilise collective fantasies' which work by engaging with desires at the conscious and subconscious level to 'inscribe certain subject positions,' (Hall, 1997, p. 271; Ussher, 1997; Walkerdine, 1984). Therefore I argue that to understand the relationship *between* popular media texts and narratives

in the discursive construction of subjectivity, it is essential to consider how fantasies operate within this and to fail to do so would exclude a central aspect of subject formation and intimate life.

I build on Valerie Walkerdine's psychosocial study which argues that taking a solely discursive approach to subjectivity, which is concerned *only* with the embodied, socio-historical context, would fail to capture the desires and emotions which are fundamental to the intimate realm (Walkerdine, 1984). Drawing on Michel Foucault, Walkerdine's study examines how girls' cartoons presented heterosexual romance narratives as the solution to psychic conflicts within which girls are 'inserted'. She argues that these media representations of female subjectivity produce and regulate female *desires* by reinscribing heteronormative family structures. Thus, I similarly investigate the tension between cultural representations of single femininity and how these are experienced at the level of individual subjectivity in ways that produce and regulate female desire.

While Foucault's technologies of the self sees the subject as actively and agentially constructing a 'self', Scott argues that we are not *solely* rational, agentic subjects, but are also driven by desires (Scott, 2011, p. 19). Therefore, fantasies are a way of identifying how these motivations *also* influence the formation of subjectivity. Fantasy therefore may also offer a more illuminating way to discover radical alternatives to hegemonic constructions than a solely rational conception. Fantasy helps to mitigate critiques of Foucault which claim that his construction of subjectivity produces 'docile bodies', as outlined above, and provides a deeper theorisation of how subjectivity formation is *experienced* at an emotional level. My research contributes to an understanding of how fantasies of singledom may regulate female desire in the contemporary context. The use of fantasy is also consistent with a discursive conceptualisation of subjectivity as not being fixed or unitary, but as being mutable and multiple (Scott, 2011, p. 5).

In summary, I combine my discursive approach with the concept of fantasy, which is theorised as a desire to be in the place of the 'other', and as temporally drawing on notions of past, present and future (See Chapter 3.5.2). A detailed outline of how fantasy is employed is explained in the next chapter (Chapter 4 Methodology and Research Design).

### **3.6 Conclusion**

To summarise, my research is inspired by a Foucauldian approach to subjectivity as produced through discourses of power. This opens up an exploration of how feminine subjectivities are discursively produced through regulatory, gendered discourses of singledom. Understanding singledom as a technology of the self provides me with a conceptualisation of single subjectivities as actively constructed through, but not *determined by*, discourses in cultural representations. A Foucauldian conceptualisation also offers a way of exploring how the mediated figure of the single woman and narratives of single



female subjectivity are socially and historically located and produced through interconnecting, intersecting identity categories. I use this to consider how gendered discourses in cultural representations and individual self-narratives produce multiple, single subjectivities in regulatory, yet also potentially resistant or alternative ways.

To deepen a Foucauldian theorisation of subjectivity and more adequately conceptualise the operation of power and agency at the *psychic* level, I combine this with a psychosocial approach to subjectivity. Drawing on Butler, I understand subjectivity as an active, desiring and potentially transformative process which takes place through discourses of power operating at both the cultural and individual psychic level. Informed by psychoanalytical theory, this provides an understanding of how discourses of single femininity circulate at both the subconscious and conscious level. This also offers an exploration of how collective, subconscious fantasies at the cultural level are incorporated at the conscious and subconscious level of the individual psyche. Butler's theorisation also opens up consideration of how certain positions are rendered desirable, or abjectly undesirable through their positioning at the limits of feminine subjectivity.

I integrate Butler's theory of gender performativity to examine how femininity is being fantasmically 'performed' through repeated discursive gendered acts at the conscious level, through the self-narratives of single woman, *and* through subconscious fantasies at the cultural and individual level. I use this to explore how regulatory norms of femininity may be performatively sustained but also transformed, threatened or undone through discursive fantasies of the single woman. A key theoretical contribution my thesis makes is therefore to draw together a psychosocial and performative conceptualisation of how feminine subjectivity is formed at the discursive, social, cultural and psychic level through discourses of singledom. I also take into account how such discourses circulate within shifting power structures and are intersected by multiple identity categories.

I draw together the discursive construction of single female subjectivities at the cultural and the individual level through the lens of fantasy in order to explore the tensions between the two realms. Fantasy is used *alongside* a discursive framing to more deeply trace how desires surrounding singledom work to discursively regulate or perhaps transform female subjectivities at the psychic level. I conceptualise fantasy as a desire to be in the place of the 'other', and as temporally drawing on notions of past, present and future. I use this to examine how fantasies of becoming the 'other' in self narratives and in representations of singledom work to reinscribe power relations by constructing gendered single subjectivities as being desirable or not. I will consider how both collective and individual single subjectivities are constructed by drawing on fantasies surrounding notions of the past, present or future to position certain subjectivities as being desirable, or undesirable, and to resinscribe broader ideologies.

Having discussed the conceptual and theoretical foundations of my study, in the next chapter I demonstrate how my methodological approach is informed by this theoretical framing, and how I employ the selected methods to answer my research questions.

## Chapter 4. Methodology and research design

### 4.1 Introduction

As discussed in Chapters 1, 2 and 3, my research aims to investigate the relationship between cultural representations of single femininity within contemporary society and lived experience of single women. I am interested in examining the implications that an apparent tension between fantasies of single femininity circulating at the cultural level and the level of individual experience is having on single women's subjectivities. I aim to develop a more nuanced approach to the discursive construction of subjectivity; one which theorises subjectivity formation as an active and *desiring* process which takes place through discursive fantasies operating at both the social and individual *psychic* level (Butler, 2011, p. 3). I also want to investigate the ways in which single women negotiate contemporary cultural representations, thus contributing to a deeper theorisation of how cultural representations are being experienced at the level of individual subjectivity. To do so, I ask: what *fantasies* do contemporary cultural representations of the single woman mobilise and how are these fantasies *negotiated* within women's self-narratives of single subjectivity?

To address these research questions, I have designed my study to interrogate and make sense of how single femininity is formed through, and constitutive of discourses at *both* the cultural and the individual level. As I am investigating the relationship between postfeminist culture and individual subjectivity, this has led me to draw on two kinds of data sets – both media texts and qualitative semi-structured interviews – as a way of focusing not only on what fantasies emerge *within* both locations but also on the tensions *between* lived experience and cultural constructions. To examine how the figure of the single woman emerges in contemporary US-UK culture, I have selected eight media representations drawn from the popular cultural genres of film, television, advertising, and women's magazines. To also investigate how these cultural discourses are encountered, experienced and negotiated at the individual, psychic level, I have conducted 25 semi-structured interviews with self-identifying single women living in London.

Below, I discuss the rationale for how the media texts and interviewees were chosen, how the interviews were conducted, and the implications such choices have had on my research. I then elaborate on why a thematic analysis was most appropriate to identify and organise the prominent themes found within the data. I discuss why a Foucauldian discourse analysis was then used to explore how gender is constructed through networks of power and how these are intersected by multiple identity categories, following my intersectional approach. I then address how the data sets were drawn together through the lens of fantasy to investigate how cultural fantasies emerged and were negotiated within the single women's

accounts. Such a lens was used to explore how fantasies at the individual level performatively sustained but also perhaps transformed, threatened or diverged from cultural fantasies of the single woman, and consider what impact this has on single women's lived experience.

Finally, I outline why my research is informed by a feminist methodology, one which seeks to illuminate subjugated knowledges grounded in everyday experience (Abu-Lughod, 1993), and incorporates an ethics of care. I engage in careful self-reflexivity as to my own positioning within the research and how this has influenced all aspects of the project. I also attempt to reflect on the limitations of my design as a whole, and what this may mean both for my findings and future research into the relationship between cultural discourses and subjectivity formation.

## **4.2 Data collection**

### **4.2.1 Selection of media texts**

For my first data set, I analysed eight media texts, drawn from contemporary US-UK mass media popular culture, which is defined as postfeminist (See Chapter 1.4). While my research is UK-based, I included US texts, as contemporary postfeminist popular culture is highly transatlantic and transnational (Dosekun, 2015; Stewart, 2013). Indeed, US and UK postfeminist culture features a strong 'discursive harmony' (Orgad, 2016; Tasker & Negra, 2007, p. 13) and to exclude US texts would exclude a major part of US culture<sup>11</sup>. Media viewing habits in the UK have also become increasingly transnational in recent years (Ofcom, 2019, pp. 18; 54), particularly within the crime genre (Jermyn, 2017). According to Ofcom's Media Nations UK 2019 report, almost half of UK households (47%) subscribed to subscription video-on-demand platforms (primarily Netflix and Amazon Prime), which feature predominantly US or transnationally produced texts (Ofcom, 2019). Therefore, one European text, *The Bridge*, co-produced in Sweden and Denmark has been included (see Chapter 4.2.2 below).

Following Taylor, the pervasiveness of postfeminism as a discursive system, means it requires analysis across a range of sites, therefore my selection includes multiple genres of media (Taylor, 2012). My selection process is inspired by Lilie Chouliaraki's 'merit of example', which draws on the concept of *phronesis*. This approach takes the repetition of different, but interrelated, regimes of representation *across* texts and sites as indicating a universal significance (Chouliaraki, 2006, pp. 9–10). Chouliaraki's study explored how discourses flow within national and global networks, which relates to my focus on transatlantic postfeminist popular culture. While it departs from my study by looking at how crisis is framed within transnational news media, I find her method useful for establishing how patterns of discourse circulating across genres and national sites participate in the same symbolic work. While the texts span different genres, they are all linked by being key transatlantic texts which appeal to female-

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<sup>11</sup> Many of the cultural texts my interviewees spontaneously mentioned were US or transnational texts.

identified audiences. I applied Chouliaraki's approach to identify and select texts where the key postfeminist and historical themes of single femininity identified in the literature are systematically discursively repeated (see Chapter 4.2.2 below)<sup>12</sup>. Importantly, I consider each media text as both specific *and* universal, as representing a unique discursive articulation within a distinct genre, which speaks to a broader repertoire: 'this perspective takes every particular case to be a unique enactment of a discourse that even though it transcends the case cannot exist outside the enactment of cases,' (Chouliaraki, 2006, p. 10). Thus, where there is *one* example from a particular genre, such as advertising, I understand it as forming part of a broader discursive regime circulating across popular cultural genres. These cases considered *together* help to make sense of the complex array of contemporary representations of single femininity within postfeminist culture. I also situate each text within its particular genre to consider how this patterns its articulation in distinct ways. My selection is not intended to be fully representative, as it would be impossible to encompass the entire cultural landscape of discourses on singleness and femininity (Orgad, 2020a). Rather the cases allow for in-depth an analysis of relevant examples and how they resonate with or contrast to the interviewees' accounts – a tension with which I am most concerned<sup>13</sup>.

As I want to examine the quintessential genres of popular culture, I chose texts from film, TV, advertising, and popular press (periodicals). I start from the assertion that popular culture is central in sustaining ideologies of romance and heterosexual desire (Taylor, 2012, p. 22) and Wood's argument that popular media consumption of genres such as TV are increasingly implicated within subjectivity formation (Wood, 2009, p. 184). I have mainly drawn from TV and film as examples of mass media which not only enjoy wide circulation and heavy promotion<sup>14</sup>, but are fundamental in shaping fantasies of intimate life (Ingraham, 1999). Popular music has been analysed where it appears in the texts, providing a way of identifying relevant examples and examining how music emerges intertextually. I also chose advertising as a major site of hegemonic cultural fantasies, which draws on both tensions at the psychic level of identity formation and social norms, relevant to my psychosocial approach (Winship, 2000). Finally I included women's magazines as they are an historically 'unparalleled and privileged space' for the production of femininity, (McRobbie, 2020, p. 66) constituting a key source of cultural ideas surrounding femininity (Gill, 2009b). Further Gill claims that women's magazines are a major site for commodity feminism, where readers are incited to buy products to makeover the self, relevant to my focus on self-transformation (Favaro, 2017; Gill & Elias, 2014, p. 181). As discussed above, my case

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<sup>12</sup> *Chewing Gum*'s debut episode drew an audience which was two-thirds female (Farber, 2015).

<sup>13</sup> While I did not mention the media texts in the interviews, several were spontaneously brought up by the women, indicating that they were significant to the interviewees (Orgad, 2020a, p. 239).

<sup>14</sup> The latest Ofcom Media Nation Report indicates that 89% of the UK population in 2019 consumed at least 15 minutes of broadcast TV per week (Ofcom, 2019).

selection does not seek to be fully representative of one genre, and instead the texts are chosen as they feature key tropes of single femininity identified by my literature review (See Chapter 2).

To find the texts, I scanned TV and film databases using the key words of single woman, single women, single, single female, single girl, and single lady. I also searched popular press to see which shows and films were being released and achieving prominence. I searched online for periodicals and advertising related to single women, and via social media sites such as Instagram, Facebook and Twitter, using the same keywords. Then I assessed each text to see if they corresponded to the relevant themes found in the literature review. Specifically, I identified where historical and contemporary tropes of single femininity and postfeminist culture – specifically chastity/asexuality, deviancy, vulnerability/mental instability, hypersexualisation, professionalisation and self-surveillance – were repeated across sites and genres (I was also attentive to newly emerging themes). Texts were also selected for diversity of race, class, sexuality, disability and age in the main characters, as these are identified as key themes in postfeminist culture (See Chapter 2.2.2).

#### *Limitations and exclusions*

At first I considered including autobiographical blogs in my study, as personal blogs may contain alternative forms of knowledge and offer more potential to challenge hegemonic mass media representations (Taylor, 2011, p. 80). However, disappointingly, I found a lack of blogs or newsletters written by single women. The majority of those I did find were US-based, primarily constructed through religious discourses (e.g. Christian blogs emphasising chastity before marriage) which reinscribe normative, monogamous long-term coupledness. Looking at social media more broadly, I discovered a limited number of Instagram accounts, yet they were often not personalised. Instead they featured reposts of mass media popular cultural images, such as stills from the TV/Film series *Sex And The City*, suggesting that this is not an identity that users wanted to personally identify with but which nevertheless appealed to them. The absence of social media accounts from my study means that alternative or more radical discourses may have been excluded or minimised in my analysis, which will have shaped my findings. However social media focused on single femininity would be an interesting area for future research (See Chapter 8). It has also been argued that film as a genre has been somewhat slower to engage with gender parity both in its representation and production, in comparison to TV, print and online media (Littler, 2020; Pieper, Choueiti, & Smith, 2016). The inclusion of two films perhaps limits the potential for encountering more transformatory discourses, but it does allow for analysis of mainstream hegemonic discourses.

I do not include self-help texts or advice columns, which may have offered a more productive, deeper analysis of singledom as a technology of the self. However self-help is a genre which has been extensively

researched within studies of media and single femininity (Fink, 2012; Taylor, 2012). Also women's magazines as a genre is understood as aligning closely with the advice/self-help genre (Favaro, 2017)<sup>15</sup>.

Singledom is a broad category, and I deliberately excluded cultural depictions of single mothers, widows, or formerly married women, unless they were particularly radical. I concur with Taylor, who notes that, while divorced women experience different forms of disadvantage in lived experience, popular cultural portrayals of divorced or widowed women 'are imbued with a form of cultural capital that eludes the single woman' as she has 'at least once defeated [her] singleness (and more often than not fulfilled [her] procreative function)' (Taylor, 2012, p. 31). Taylor argues that the figure of the never-married single woman is thus rendered more problematic, attracting more anxiety and visibility than divorced women (Taylor, 2012, p. 2). This has shaped my findings so that intersections with maternal and divorced or widowed femininities are obscured, yet this has also allowed a deeper, more specific, analysis of single femininity. As I discuss in Chapter 8, representations of these distinct groups of single women would be an important area for future studies.

I also excluded texts focused on dating, as they are centred more closely around coupling, which departs from my focus. As noted in Chapter 1.1, these texts continue to be prominent within popular culture, and inclusion of these would have allowed exploration of why, and how they shape more normative understandings of femininity and singledom. Yet my focus on single women who are less actively seeking coupledness/dating offered the potential to perhaps discover less hegemonic, more alternative representations of singledom. While I sought to include all age groups, representations of older single femininities were limited, which has inevitably narrowed the media analysis. Yet I was able to balance this by the inclusion of the voices of older single women in the interviews (see Chapter 4.2.3 below).

The media texts also predominantly depict white, middle class femininities. While this is characteristic of postfeminist media, I try to attend closely to the consequences of such racial and class privileging in the analysis. However this inevitably did not allow for extensive exploration of how class divisions in representations of single femininity are being reproduced. Such an omission is important in the context of widening socio-economic divisions and the Covid-19 pandemic (See also Chapter 8). Existing research has indicated that working-class femininities are pathologised in media discourses of motherhood (Orgad & De Benedictis, 2015). Yet as Allen, Tyler and De Benedictis argue in their analysis of single mothers and reality TV shows, working class femininities open up spaces for a more ambiguous, paradoxical, and at times radical, revisioning of femininity and class (Allen et al., 2014). Therefore such nuances could have been productively investigated in more depth by including more depictions of working class femininity.

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<sup>15</sup> For example, the periodical I analysed contained several articles on dating advice.

#### 4.2.2 The media texts

For my analysis, I selected:

- four television shows: *Chewing Gum*, *The Good Wife*, *The Bridge*, *Fargo*;
- two films: *How To Be Single* and *Frances Ha*;
- one consumer periodical, *Elle* US Magazine;
- one television advert for Ford Fiesta Cars.

In what follows I provide a description of each text, its genre, and rationale for selection. In making my selection I considered how the texts worked together, to ensure that they were not repetitive. For example, while the television show *Fleabag* was a significant text released at the time of research, I did not choose it for several reasons. First, it starred a white, middle-class, urban, young woman, overlapping with several of the texts which also depicted white, urban middle-class femininity – for example *The Bridge*, *Frances Ha*, *Elle* US Magazine, Ford Fiesta Advert and *How To Be Single* – and as discussed I sought to achieve diversity within my representations. Like *Chewing Gum*, *Fleabag* is a TV comedy show written and produced by the lead female star, Phoebe Waller Bridge, and it also employs techniques of soliloquy<sup>16</sup>. However, as discussed below, *Chewing Gum* allowed examination of more marginalised black and working class femininities and how these intersected with themes of religion and chastity<sup>17</sup>. Both series of *Fleabag* were broadcast transatlantically on Netflix and on BBC Two/BBC Three in the UK, but while the first series achieved a modest audience, the second series achieved significant popularity in the UK and the US, and attracted heavy international media coverage and four Emmy awards (Ford, 2019). However, the second series featured the lead character falling in love and, while she was not in a ‘full’ relationship, the series featured strong narratives of romance and coupledness, which departs from my focus and perhaps accounted for its popularity.

For each of the TV programmes, I selected individual seasons for analysis rather than the entire show. Following my selection technique, I am interested in where particular tropes of postfeminism and single femininity are repeated systematically across popular cultural sites. This means that I took a precise, targeted approach to my selection which centres on a few significant cases studies as part of a *wider* discursive repertoire and therefore indicate significance. Therefore, I have selected the most relevant series – but I contextualise each series, explaining why the series has been chosen in more detail, and how it relates to the other series in the show. This methodological choice is also led by the overall cultural privileging of coupledness and absence of single femininities in popular cultural representations, which

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<sup>16</sup> The inspiration for the TV series was a solo stage show that Waller-Bridge wrote and performed at the 2013 Edinburgh Festival, which continued in London (2014-2016, 2019). *Chewing Gum* also began as a solo stage show written and starring Coel.

<sup>17</sup> Series Two of *Fleabag* featured themes of religion and chastity, but only in relation to romantic love.



limits my selection (Taylor, 2012). (See Chapter 2.1) For example in *Chewing Gum*, the main character is only single for one of the two series; with *The Good Wife*, not only is the single character, Kalinda, not a lead character and therefore limited in her appearance, her intimate life is rarely focused on except for the season I have chosen. This also allowed me to conduct a more in-depth analysis of the chosen series, which is consistent with my qualitative methodology of close discursive textual analysis.

## **Television shows**

### **Comedy**

#### ***Chewing Gum* Series 2 (2017)**

*Chewing Gum* is a TV comedy sitcom written and executive produced by Micheala Coel, who stars as 24-year-old black single woman, Tracey. It was made for Channel 4 and aired in January 2017 in the UK. It received modest viewing figures<sup>1</sup> – but significant critical acclaim. It is still available on Channel 4 online and now via Netflix, where it has received US recognition (Desta, 2017). The show is centred around Tracey who lives with her Evangelical Christian family and is a virgin, drawing on multiple historical tropes of single femininity. The text allows exploration of how these themes intersect with marginalised racial and class identities: it features a predominantly black or ethnic minority cast and is set within a London council estate. An Ofcom report highlights *Chewing Gum* as an example of more diverse representation in UK public service TV broadcasting (Ofcom, 2018).

As part of the comedy genre, the show challenges the common cultural Western stereotype that women cannot be cast in funny roles or comedic writers (Patterson, 2012, p. 237). Coel has stated that she wanted to use the genre to radically subvert negative associations of working class communities (Gilbert, 2017). Series Two follows Tracey struggling to cope after having split with her boyfriend, trying to maintain her friendships, develop new interests and meet new people, while still living with her overbearing mother and sister. I did not include Series One, as the narrative centres around her first boyfriend Ronald then her subsequent pursuit of and coupling with Connor. But it should be noted that the romantic relationships that she has in Series One are limited and Tracey remains a virgin. During the gap between the series Tracey becomes homeless following estrangement with her family and breakup with Connor, drawing on themes of vulnerability and precarity. Series One more prominently features her antagonistic relationships with her sister and mother, whereas Series Two features a more diverse range of relationships, including friendships and new acquaintances.

### **Crime drama**

Three TV shows, *The Bridge*, *Fargo* and *The Good Wife* are from the crime drama genre, which has been chosen for several reasons. While crime as a popular fictional genre has traditionally ‘foregrounded masculinist and misogynistic narratives’ (Godsland & White, 2009, p. 49), the genre’s preoccupation with identity – with literally determining ‘whodunit’ – means that it lends itself to both affirming and

undermining concepts of identity formation (Krajenbrink & Quinn, 2009, p. 1), relevant to my focus on subjectivity. Indeed Godsland and White, referring to the European context, claim that feminist writers since the 1990s have exploited its focus on identity to expand gendered norms of the genre by introducing the figure of the female detective, ‘making the mainstream more marginal’ (Godsland & White, 2009, p. 50; Thornham, 2003). The female detective is now commonplace in primetime television crime series, challenging the traditionally male detective. Yet curiously it often still perpetuates postfeminist and misogynistic narratives, argues Deborah Jermyn (Jermyn, 2017). This popularity however makes the single female detective an interesting site for investigation of how the boundaries of femininity may be being reformed or reinscribed through such a liminal figure.

### ***The Bridge, Season One (2012)***

*The Bridge* (originally *Bron/Broen*) is a Scandinavian crime thriller co-produced in Sweden and Denmark and broadcast in 140 countries. Season One was broadcast in the UK on BBC Four in 2012 to critical and popular acclaim, drawing one million viewers which is significant for the channel. The channel’s remit is to show ‘intellectually and culturally enriching’ UK and international programming and has a high socio-economic, almost exclusively white audience (96% white) (BBC, 2012; Dowell, 2017). It is an immensely popular text from the Nordic Noir subgenre (Jermyn, 2017, p. 265), garnering large audiences and critical acclaim, while presenting complex feminisms which challenge gender norms (McHugh, 2018, p. 538). Nordic Noir has been popular in the UK cultural context since the 2010s (Redvall, 2016, p. 345). Stougaard-Nielsen argues that there is an elitist, racialised element to such popularity in the UK, with Nordic Noir offering a form of consumable whiteness which is ‘ethically appropriate’ (Stougaard-Nielsen, 2016, p. 4). Therefore, the text is limited by its narrow depiction of race and class. In Season One (2012), Saga Norén (Sofia Helin) stars as the lead detective at a large police department in Sweden. Saga embodies a youthful, slim, white femininity, which Janet McCabe argues is a globally privileged form of beauty which traverses national borders (McCabe, 2019, p. 303). Her character therefore allows for an intersectional examination of how racially privileged femininity travels transnationally. *The Bridge* however repeats stigmatising historical tropes of single femininity as dysfunctional. Though there are four seasons of *The Bridge*, I focus on Season One, where Saga’s character is single. While later seasons reveal more about her complex family history and brief romantic ties<sup>18</sup> in this season, Saga only has casual sexual encounters.

### ***The Good Wife, Season Four (2013)***

*The Good Wife* is a popular legal-political drama set at a prestigious Chicago-based law firm. While it is not a detective show, it draws on tropes from crime drama through the figure of the single female

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<sup>18</sup> Saga engages in a brief live-in relationship in Series 2 and has a sexual relationship with her colleague in Season 3.

detective in interesting ways. In comparison to the other two crime texts, *The Good Wife* is more mainstream, produced for mass-media broadcaster CBS. As a national US network broadcaster, CBS faces strict regulation and commercial pressures as it is dependent on advertising revenues and viewer ratings, and must appeal to a mass-media audience. Yet *The Good Wife* is hailed as an example of *quality* mainstream TV which explores a rich and complex spectrum of feminist and anti-feminist discourse (T. C. Miller, 2016, p. 156). Viewing figures for the UK were unavailable, but the show was broadcast in the UK on Channel 4 in 2013, is now on Amazon Prime. Kalinda (Archie Panjabi) is a middle class, thirtysomething, bisexual of Indian ethnicity<sup>1</sup>, who is a private investigator at the firm. While Kalinda does have an estranged ex-husband, I chose her for several reasons. Leonie Taylor argues Kalinda's character is a site of contestation, allowing for examination of how ethnic minority and bisexual femininity work together to break with or sustain gendered norms (Taylor 2016). While the other detectives are lead characters, Kalinda is a high-profile secondary character – yet her marginal positioning offers a particularly radical representation. I also build on Michaela Meyer's argument that the secondary female, bisexual, non-white character is a significant trope in contemporary TV used to shore up the dominant white heterosexual main characters they are positioned against, a troubling phenomenon which merits further investigation (Meyer, 2010). Kalinda's sporadic appearance means her character has to compete to maintain interest across Season 4's 22 episodes (Fiske, 2010) but this long run perhaps leads to a richer, more nuanced portrayal (Brunsdon, 2012, p. 66). While Kalinda's character appears in six seasons of *The Good Wife*, and is briefly coupled in other seasons<sup>19</sup>, in Season 4 as she has no consistent romantic partnership and in comparison to the other seasons, it focuses more closely on Kalinda's intimate life.

### ***Fargo*, Season One (2014)**

Season One of *Fargo* was broadcast on Channel 4 in the UK (2014) to critical acclaim and gathered a modest viewership of two million (Kanter, 2014). *Fargo* was produced for premium subscription US TV channel FX which 'aspires to high quality writing'<sup>20</sup> and original programming. FX is owned by entertainment giant 21<sup>st</sup> century Fox, therefore is part of a mainstream entertainment network, but subject to fewer commercial pressures and less creatively restricted than *The Good Wife*. *Fargo* is inspired by the 1996 film, both produced by the Coen Brothers, who have achieved a cult following for their dark, subversive storylines (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2020). *Fargo* was selected for its potential to reach a significant popular cultural audience but also challenge norms or provide more alternative storylines. Molly Solverson is the deputy chief of the police department in the small town of Bemidji in Minnesota. As one of the show's main characters, she challenges many contemporary postfeminist discourses surrounding single women: she is white, but does not conform to an ideal feminine body type or stylisation. Molly is never hypersexualised and instead 'punctures the affective, aspirational allure'

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<sup>19</sup> With her colleague Carey.

(White, 2015) of feminine beauty norms and embodiment, but she is not constructed as unattractive. She is 31 years old, but she appears older and while she lives alone, has a close relationship with her father and the community. *The Good Wife* and *Fargo* are both produced and set in the US, but *Fargo* shares tropes associated with Nordic Noir – the series is set in the desolate, stark, snowy landscape of Minnesota in the depths of winter in an isolated community, where the racial makeup is predominantly white. *Fargo* thus lets me explore how postfeminist tropes of single femininity may be transformed or reconfigured within a non-glamourized, non-urban setting which is atypical of primetime, postfeminist depictions of femininity (Beadling, 2019; Moseley & Read, 2002). While there are four seasons of *Fargo*, each are set in different eras and have separate storylines and characters (with minor overlap); Molly's character only appears in Season One.

### **Film:**

#### ***How To Be Single* (2016)**

*How To Be Single* (HTBS) stars four professional, white, single women, Alice, Robin, Meg and Lucy, who are played by major Hollywood actors Rebel Wilson, Dakota Johnson and Alison Brie. Set in New York City, the film was a Hollywood blockbuster, and is typical of postfeminist media culture which glamorizes and sexualizes femininity (Gill, 2007). It was released in the UK in February 2016 and is still available through paid-for streaming TV services Amazon Prime and Sky Movies. Produced by MGM and distributed by Warner Bros, the film grossed a significant box-office taking of \$46 million worldwide, enjoying significant commercial and popular success (Box Office Mojo, 2016). All of the main characters are young (in their twenties, except for one, Meg, who is in her thirties), white, upper or middle class heterosexual, hypersexualised women, reinscribing the race, class and heterosexual privilege which, as discussed above, is a key feature of postfeminist portrayals of single femininity (Tasker & Negra, 2007; Taylor, 2012). Therefore, while this text features a narrow construction of single femininity it nevertheless presents the opportunity to explore how a highly normative hegemonic constructions of single femininity are constructed, and what forms of single femininity are commercially successful within popular culture. Indeed, the film mimics and perhaps updates the earlier long-running TV/film series *Sex And The City* which is one of the most prominent representations of single femininity in contemporary popular culture. The film's narrative shows the main character Alice breaking up with her long-term boyfriend, starting a new job and negotiating the dating scene in Manhattan, along with her friends and sister.

### **Film:**

#### ***Frances Ha* (2012)**

*Frances Ha* is a romantic comedy directed by Noah Baumbach. The main character, Frances Halliday, is played by Greta Gerwig who co-wrote the film with Baumbach. Released in 2012 in the US and 2013 in the UK, it was well received by critics, and nominated for a Golden Globe. The film was

independently produced on a low budget, had a limited release, enjoying modest commercial success, grossing \$11 million worldwide (The Numbers, 2013). The film is shot in black and white, in the style of French New Wave cinema (Brody, 2013) which aimed to challenge the norms of cinematography. The black-and-white format lends a nostalgic, offbeat aesthetic and distances the film from romance comedy genre norms, which glamorise femininity (Guilluy, 2018, p. 20). Yet it conforms to the genre by being light-hearted and depicting intimate relationships. While it is an independent film, as with *How To Be Single*, it replicates dominant postfeminist constructions of femininity as white, middle class and heterosexual. All of the characters are white, heterosexual and middle- to upper-middle class, and the director is a white male – typical of independent film<sup>21</sup>. Frances is a 27-year-old woman who lives in New York City and works as an apprentice dancer. Frances is slim, blonde and young, but she is never hypersexualized, nor presented as unattractive, resisting both tropes of single femininity. Having broken up with her boyfriend, we see her trying to make a living, maintain her friendships and date.

### **Periodical:**

#### ***Elle* US magazine ‘The Single Lady Issue’ (2016)**

A special edition of *Elle* US magazine ‘The Single Lady Issue’, was published online in February 2016, to coincide with Valentine’s Day. *Elle* Magazine is one of the world’s largest women’s fashion magazine brands, with 44 global editions. The average US reader (print and online) is age 36 (44% of readers are 18-34; most of the non-celebrity women in the magazine are in their late teens or 20s), and the magazine’s website has 4.3 million unique visitors per month (Hearst, 2020). As such a prominent cultural text, the magazine contributes to hegemonic constructions of femininity in contemporary popular culture. Women’s consumer magazines represent a particularly powerful convergence of discourses of governmentality and postfeminist modes of regulation such as love your body/self-discourses – particularly with respect to cultivation of norms of embodiment and self-confidence (Favaro, 2017; Gill & Orgad, 2015). Therefore the special edition represents a rich paradigmatic example of how postfeminist discourses of single femininity are being repeated and reproduced (Chouliaraki, 2006). Although the text was produced in the US, it is online, which provides a global reach. It thus offers a good example of how postfeminist logics operate both nationally and transnationally, due to its highly mediated form (Dosekun, 2015). The title and the tagline of the issue ‘Party of one, Emphasis on party’ address the single woman as a singular, rather than collective, and each article is branded with the defiant image of a hand holding up a single index finger. This emphasis on individualisation is consistent across the issue, with singledom often constructed as part of a commoditized, identity or style, emptied of political rhetoric typical of postfeminism (Gill, 2016a).

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<sup>21</sup> A report by the Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism showed that race/ethnicity of directors is strongly associated with character diversity. It reported that of films shown at the Sundance Film Festival (2002-2013) the number of directors from underrepresented ethnicities was just under one in four (Pieper et al., 2016).

Articles include several features on how to arrange, dress and behave on dates, films and songs about single women, an interview with a rom-com director, beauty products to use after a one-night-stand, and a first-person account of the downsides of marriage. While there are some representations of ethnic minority femininities, a major limitation of the text is its privileging of white, middle class, heterosexual femininity.

### **Advert:**

#### **Ford Fiesta ST-Line car advert (2017)**

I searched online for advertising directed at, or featuring, single women, however there is little advertising aimed explicitly at single women in the UK, reflective of a ‘marginalisation of single consumers’ in the marketplace (Lai et al., 2015). The Ford Fiesta ST-Line car advert was broadcast on UK TV in March 2017; the Ford Car Company has consistently been the best-selling car brand in the UK over the past decade (Bekker, 2019). The car industry has recently tried to target more women (Halpert, 2014), but has been accused of being overly masculine in its advertising (Hull, 2017). Therefore, this advert perhaps is part of this shift and highlights what messages advertisers think will appeal to women. As Winship argues, female-focused adverts – including car adverts – have been controversial for the ways in which they have subverted conventional gender norms (Winship, 2000, p. 37). The advert features a young woman, who is in her late twenties or early thirties, deciding whether to buy a mid-range car. Once more it is limited by its narrow representation of white, middle class, slim, youthful, able-bodied femininity that conforms to feminine beauty norms. But it contains relevant themes of self-surveillance and regulation. I have only included one advert; by including several adverts I could have more comprehensively shown how tropes were repeated across various texts. However there were few adverts addressing single women, and those that did repeated a narrow range of tropes; to have included more risked repetition. For example, one advert I considered, Wrigley’s Extra Time to Shine chewing gum advert (2016) again centred around a bride escaping from a wedding in a car, as per the Ford Advert (See Chapter 6.2). But while it featured an Asian woman, which offered racial diversity, her positioning as a bride more closely aligned with romance narratives.

#### **4.2.3 Interviews**

As I am primarily interested in the relationship between popular cultural media texts and single women’s lived experience, my second data set is women’s self-narratives of single femininity. To gather the data, I conducted 25 semi-structured, one-hour interviews with single women living in London over a six-month period between June and December 2018. Through interview, I sought to understand how they construct their single female subjectivities, and how they encountered and negotiated mediated representations of single femininity. While self-narrative has a broad range of interpretations, is considered here the process by which subjectivity is actively constructed within relevant cultural traditions by the linking of life events (Gergen & Gergen, 1997; Reynolds et al., 2007). Interviews have

been a central methodology in studies of subjectivity, and sociology more broadly; as Les Back puts it they are, ‘the favoured tool for mining people’s lives’ (Back, 2010, p. 6). As I am investigating how single women understand their subjectivity, this method allows interviewees to articulate their experiences and perspectives through their own words in ways which cannot be otherwise accessed (Allen, 2017, pp. 800–801). It provides a rich source of data which is suited to capturing the complexity, diversity and nuances of identity construction with which I am concerned (Suri, 2011, p. 65). It also contributes to the feminist tradition of investigating subjugated, situated knowledges grounded in everyday experience (Abu-Lughod, 1993).

Yet while feminist research is concerned with allowing the ‘other’ to speak, the idea of ‘giving voice’ through interview is problematic, with Les Back arguing that the interior of a person cannot be fully captured (Back, 2010). Beverley Skeggs claims that all that can be achieved in the interview is a *partial* representation of the social production of identity (Skeggs cited by Letherby, 2003, p. 78). Indeed, a challenge I faced was the issue of representation inherent in the interview method. I build on the claim that as researchers we can never fully give voice, as we do not have direct access to others’ experience, only ambiguous representations (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). While such dilemmas cannot be *fully* overcome, I endeavoured to capture as far as possible the diversity and complexity of subjects’ accounts, while recognising their complexity as socially situated, mediated representations. Instead of considering the interview as producing an authentic inner ‘truth’, I understood it as a staged social exchange (Back, 2010) or discursive event which is historically and socially located within power relations of speaker and hearer (Alcoff, 1992; Duneier & Back, 2006). I do not claim that these accounts represent a ‘truth’ about the subjectivities of the women I interviewed or singledom itself. Instead, I understand them as ‘slices of time’ in which a mutable, socially-shaped glimpse is given (Back, 2010, p. 21). I am aware that as researcher, I was also involved in evaluating the accounts, and in doing so, made assumptions about the women, and my impact as an interviewer (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). As I result, I have attempted to reflect on my role and perspective in interpreting, representing and analysing my interviewee’s self-narratives (see Section 4.4).

#### **4.2.4 Selection of interviewees**

I selected women who lived in London, and self-defined as single and female, using a short pre-interview questionnaire. I asked women to self-define as single not only to clarify this broad category, but to centre it appropriately around subjective identification. As with the media texts, I did not include divorcees, widows or single mothers<sup>22</sup>. Singledom is not understood as a homogenous category and I argue that

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<sup>22</sup> Two of the interviewees had been married for visa reasons and were now divorced. They were included as they did not subjectively understand themselves as having been married in a normative sense and did not accrue social capital from such a status, e.g. they did not tell others and did not see the relationships as long-term.

there are fundamental disparities between the lived experience of never-married, divorced, widows and single mothers (Lahad, 2016a, p. 501). I concur with Lahad's claims that passing perceived life stages such as marriage at the correct time constitutes 'success' within intimate life (Lahad, 2017, p. 58), even if the subject later becomes single again through divorce or death. Following my research questions and intersectional approach, I recruited women from a range of categories of age, race, class and sexuality, to examine how multiple feminine subjectivities intersect. As discussed above, postfeminist culture has been critiqued as privileging youthful, white femininity, and this lack of racial and age diversity was indeed apparent in the media texts selected, therefore I particularly sought to interview ethnic minorities and voices from older women, who lacked such cultural visibility (See also Chapter 8). That said, the sample does not claim to be representative of *all* single women in London.

I took a purposive rather than representative approach, which aimed to identify an information-rich, diverse range of women, related to my focus and aim of including a variety of experiences (Orgad, 2020a). I recruited interviewees using purposeful (targeted) sampling, via the snowball technique (Suri, 2011, p. 65). Although the snowball technique was effective, I predictably received responses from those similar to my own positioning – white, middle class, heterosexual women in their thirties. I therefore had to widen my approach by posting on MeetUp, a website used to create in-person events based around common interests and ages<sup>23</sup>. Less specialist online forums such as Reddit and Gumtree did not produce results. To find younger women, I then placed adverts on forums for UCL students and through a contact at a university. To reach those not online, particularly older or lower-income groups, I placed adverts in cafes and supermarkets in South London, which is a particularly diverse area. To try and recruit LGBTQ and non-cisgender women, I advertised in the LGBTQ magazine DIVA, and LSE's Spectrum and Feminist Society. Finally, to target older women, I advertised at charities, AGE UK and Ageing without Children, and a law firm.

The sample was diverse in terms of age, race and sexuality, being made up of: five women in their twenties; 13 in their thirties; four in their forties; two in their fifties and one in their sixties; 19 were white; three were South East Asian; two were Black; one was Latin American; all were middle class, apart from three working-class women; 18 self-defined as heterosexual; two as lesbian; three as bisexual; one as queer and one as asexual (See Appendix 3 Interviewees' characteristics and interview location). Unfortunately, despite my efforts, due to a lack of people coming forward, time and sample size, I did not manage to recruit any transgender women but this would be an important group to include in future research, given my central focus on femininity (See Chapter 8). Only three of my interviewees were working class and my empirical chapters reveal that there were some sharp class distinctions within the women's accounts of singledom. Foregrounding class by including more, or only, working class women

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<sup>23</sup> I first secured permission from the group convener.



would have allowed me to examine this in more depth. However centring femininity and including a range of classes allowed for an interesting cross-class analysis of how femininity is produced.

#### *Location*

The UK was chosen as a location because of its relevance as a late-modern, postfeminist, neoliberalised media and consumer culture (McRobbie, 2009; Tincknell, 2015). The UK has a rapidly changing political climate, with a resurgence in right-wing politics (demonstrated by the 2016 EU referendum and subsequent negotiations), and a deepening neoliberalisation of mainstream politics (Nunn, 2014). This is in contrast to the US, where individual choice and neoconservative values have long underpinned political attitudes (Evans, 2015). London specifically was chosen as it contains a rich range of class, race, sexuality and age groups from which to draw a diverse sample. London's more left-wing political stance (indicated by the 2016 EU referendum voting and mayoral elections), and recognition as a feminist hub provides a hybrid location in which to situate these broader shifts and offers a complex, unique political background (Evans, 2015, p. 8). Indeed, my interviewees frequently said that they felt London offered a more left-wing, liberal location, which was open to alternative relationship structures, including singledom (See also Chapter 8.5). I also selected London as I have lived here for 20 years and have developed extensive knowledge of and familiarity with the culture, politics and demographics of the city. This allowed me to make informed choices as to where to recruit interviewees (see above) and facilitated my analysis of the interview data. It was also a practical choice which allowed easy access to my interviewees. I acknowledge that by selecting only women from London this will have shaped the analysis according to these factors; including other locations in the UK would have presented experiences borne from a less liberal political context.

#### **4.2.5 The interview process**

I conducted the one-hour interviews at a location of the women's choice. Where they were unwilling to choose a location, I selected somewhere neutral, such as a café, to minimise power imbalances as far as possible; I did not invite them to my office. Only four interviewees invited me to their home, three invited me to their workplace, and the rest were held in cafes or bars or in the park. It should be noted that this may have led to a less open exchange, as most interviews were conducted in public spaces. When I was invited into the interviewees' homes this often produced a greater sense of intimacy and trust and aided the discussion. For interviews where I was invited to the women's workplaces, despite each of them having at least one interruption, there was again more of a sense of intimacy, perhaps as these were more comfortable spaces for them than public locations, and they offered me a glimpse into the interviewees' (professional) worlds. However, that is not to say that interviews in public places were not also intimate, and several interviews in cafes/restaurants were very open and involved significant expressions of emotion.

I attempted to build rapport using a friendly, open and calm approach which was largely successful – indeed several women thanked me at the end for my open and warm, empathetic approach with one saying this had allowed her to feel very comfortable (despite the interview being momentarily interrupted by a fire alarm!). The majority of the interviews felt like intimate encounters and I left with the sense of having shared a deeply personal exchange, even where our positionings were intersected by differences in class, race, sexuality and age. There was one interview where rapport was difficult to establish and the interviewee responded negatively to a response and was defensive towards me, which I believe was due to our different positioning (see Section 4.4).

I always began by running through the structure and asking the same warm-up question of how long they had lived in London. Interviewees often looked slightly embarrassed when I then asked how long they had been single, suggesting that it was delicate topic. Several seemed nervous at first but almost all of them by the end were very relaxed. Most of the interviewees appeared keen to share their stories; however, they were frequently emotionally intense encounters, with several interviewees breaking down in tears. Yet even when difficult emotions were expressed the women demonstrated a sense of humour and light-heartedness, and the tone was complex and varied. Two interviewees expressed more significant anger, once to do with their past relationship experiences, and once directed at me (see Section 4.4). The intensity of the interviews betrayed a sense that this was an emotive topic which not only was important to my interviewees but something that they had thought a lot about, particularly the older women. For example, one said that in her twenties, being single was not something that she thought about, but in her thirties she had thought about it a lot. Another woman, when she cried during the interview said that she had brought tissues as she, ‘knew that this would happen’.

When recruiting people through the snowball technique, several contacts told me they knew a friend who was suitable but that to their surprise, the person was uncomfortable or unwilling to discuss being single. This suggests that many women feel too stigmatised to come forward, and that the sample was made up of women who felt *less* stigmatised. One interviewee told me a friend had asked her why she wanted to talk about such a topic with a stranger, which positioned her singledom as ‘unspeakable’ and stigmatising. She said it made her question whether she should go ahead, underscoring the view that it was a difficult subject. Many of the interviewees expressed gratitude that single women were the subject of research as they felt they were a neglected group in society.

The interviews were semi-structured and the topic guide was open-ended, which allowed the women to decide what was meaningful to them, guide the interview and withhold information if they wished (Burgess-Proctor, 2015, p. 128) (see Appendix 1 Interview Topic Guide). I used this structure to try and minimise the unequal positioning of the researched and researcher (Alcoff, 1992) and facilitate the flow of conversation. Questions aimed to explore women’s understandings of singledom, identifications with

representations of singledom, tensions between the two and how this may have shaped their understanding of intimate life. They were split into four topics: self-identification; temporality; how others positioned their single status; and media. The topic guide did not address the media texts I analysed directly (although these sometimes arose). Questions instead asked whether they thought their experiences of singledom were reflected in media representations to open up a broader discussion. This is because my focus is on how women negotiate cultural fantasies and/or if they construct alternative fantasies in relationship or in tension with cultural fantasies, rather how they received *specific* cultural texts. I noted where themes identified in the media texts analysis arose and explored these further (see below). Questions of temporality, such as how they understood their past, present and future aimed to open up a discussion of what alternative fantasies they might have surrounding singledom (See Chapter 4.3.3). Following my intersectional approach, questions explored intersections with race, age, sexuality, class and embodiment, but in line with the open-ended structure and so as not to impose identity categories, these were addressed indirectly; elaboration was encouraged when they arose spontaneously<sup>24</sup>. More direct questioning may have generated richer analysis of such intersections.

### **4.3 Data analysis**

Having discussed the two data sets, I will now outline how the data was analysed. I first applied two types of analysis to each data set separately. I carried out a thematic analysis to identify, categorise and hierarchise the prominent themes found in the data before conducting a Foucauldian discourse analysis on thematically rich sections. In the third stage of analysis I drew both sets together using the concept of fantasy to identify, following the research question, what fantasies do contemporary cultural representations of the single woman mobilise, and ask how such fantasies are negotiated within single women's self-narratives (See Section 4.4.4). Building on my intersectional approach, I paid attention to how categories of age, race, class, sexuality and embodiment work along multiple intersections to construct and hierarchise female subjectivities (Crenshaw, 1989). For the interviews, biographical information was incorporated into the analysis to contextualise interviewees' lived experience, and their *own* understanding of their positioning. I did so to locate the interviewees within the socio-historical context, which is inherent to the Foucauldian discursive analytical approach (see Section 4.3.2). Finally, I incorporated an ethics of care which included self-reflexivity as to my own positioning and what implications this had on the analytical process.

#### **4.3.1 Thematic analysis**

Transcriptions of the media texts were obtained from a website and checked for accuracy through close rewatching the media on-screen. For the magazine and advert, web pages and stills were captured

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<sup>24</sup> One interviewee said she was grateful I hadn't asked her to define her sexuality, which made her feel more open.

through screenshots. I transcribed the interview data by hand, which allowed for a complete immersion in the data. After being transcribed/captured, datasets were imported into NVivo and thematically analysed taking an inductive and deductive approach, to systematically code the texts. I analysed the media texts first before conducting the interviews, so that major themes found in the media texts could be addressed, if and where they arose, in the interviews. The thematic analysis of the media texts was also used to inform the thematic analysis of the interviews.

Thematic analysis allowed what was a large corpus of data to be reduced, refined and categorised according to significant themes and facilitated a search for patterns (Given, 2012). While formatting the data, I precoded the text, marking sections I thought would be relevant for indepth coding (Saldana, 2016). Codes (descriptive/manifest and analytical/latent) were then generated from reading and rereading the data, and in relation to the research questions and theoretical framework. A codebook was created which identified the code labels and definitions/meanings, and when to use or not to use them (See Appendix 4 Codebook). The codebook was refined as the thematic analysis was conducted, with unnecessary codes removed or definitions/labels refined (Guest, 2012). For example, the code of 'freedom' was removed as it was closely associated with independence. Several codes emerged from the texts which had not previously been drawn from the theoretical framework and literature, such as sexual autonomy, silencing, intersubjective regulation and location.

Patterns between the coded segments were then identified to construct emerging themes. Patterns were found by looking for similarities, differences, frequencies, sequences between codes, but I also looked for incoherencies, ambiguities, anomalies, absences and deviations (Saldana, 2016, p. 10). An abstract theme was applied to each coded section, such as 'resistance' (both individual and collective), family and friends, media absence, media regulation, ambivalence, identification and disidentification. The themes were refined to ensure that none were so broad as to be repetitive but that they were comprehensive (Attride-Stirling, 2001). Themes were then ordered into basic themes, organizing themes and global themes, informed by, but not reduced to, the theoretical framework (Attride-Stirling, 2001). These included chastity, asexuality, deviancy, social isolation, vulnerability, mental instability, sexualisation, professionalization, technologies of the self, affective regulation, and self-empowerment, identity categories of race, age, class, disability, sexuality, and embodiment. I placed basic themes that had similar issues within organizing themes. I then created global themes which summarised basic and organizing themes, and incorporated the main principles (Attride-Stirling, 2001). In doing so, I considered where themes were similar or different, where there was repetition, and where themes from the theoretical framework occurred in relationship to those derived from the data. I was attentive to moments of surprise, intrigue or disturbance and considered what this indicated for the analysis (Saldana, 2016). Finally, I created an overarching thematic map for each of the media texts and interviews by summarizing the main themes and their connections and patterns. To interpret the

patterns, I drew summaries of the thematic maps and connections, to establish how they occurred in relationship to the research questions and theoretical framework.

### **4.3.2 Foucauldian discourse analysis**

A close, in-depth Foucauldian discourse analysis was carried out on those thematically rich segments of the media and interview data which had been identified in the thematic analysis. These segments were those where the most significant themes identified by the thematic analysis and the individual and overarching thematic maps had emerged. While I discursively analysed the media texts and interview data separately, I applied the same critical, analytical questions to both. In the discourse analysis of the interviews, I was additionally attentive to the exact words, phrases, hesitations and tone used by the women, and where there were tensions and silences in their accounts, drawing on the notes and audio recordings.

I chose a Foucauldian discourse analysis as, following the research questions, I am interested in examining how fantasies of singledom produce, hierarchise and regulate female subjectivity within socially embedded, historically located networks of *power*. A Foucauldian discourse analysis therefore critically incorporates consideration of the regulatory role that wider social, political power structures play in the construction of individual subjectivities (Matheson, 2005, p. 58). This form of analysis is suited to my interest in how single subjectivities may produce or sustain gendered structures of power. I also employed a Foucauldian approach as a way to examine how media texts discursively construct subject positions through dominant discourses, as well as how discourses were drawn upon in the interviewees' self-narratives (Lai et al., 2015; Reynolds et al., 2007; Wells, 2011).

While critical discourse analysis does not have an explicit methodology, Gill describes it as examining the patterns of variability and consistency, as well as *omissions* within a text. My critical discourse analysis thus asked what single subjectivities were made possible, where the boundaries of female subjectivity were constructed or made permeable through repetitions or variations. I asked which subjectivities were *excluded* within the texts and to what effect. I asked how discourses of singledom shaped or produced the conduct of single woman, particularly through 'technologies of the self' (Foucault, 1988). I considered how subjectivities sustained gendered power structures *beyond* the text and where single subjectivities were repeated, varied or excluded within and *across* texts. Reynolds' study of lived experience of singledom was useful as it defines Foucauldian discourse analysis as examining how discourses of singledom regulate conduct; prescribe what is sayable or thinkable about singledom and so expose regimes of power; and construct knowledge about single subjects as 'truth' (Reynolds, 2008).

A Foucauldian discourse analysis was also used to examine how gendered norms of singledom are produced, constructed and encountered in a particular historical and social context, relevant to my

understanding of knowledge as socially situated (Hook, 2005). It led me to consider how discursive regimes of knowledge and meaning-making constitute and reproduce as well as resist social power structures, specifically how feminine norms are reinscribed and perhaps *also* resisted through discourses of singledom. Following my intersectional approach my analysis examined how discourses have emerged historically (as discussed in Chapter 2) and were intersected along categories of race, age, sexuality, disability and embodiment within the contemporary context. Themes of chastity, deviancy, isolation, mental instability, agency, choice sexualisation, professionalization, self-surveillance, self-empowerment, self-accountability, independence and agency which emerged from thematic analysis were examined in relation to power. For example, regimes of self-surveillance were identified through themes of physical and internal monitoring and efforts to change the self at the psychic, behavioural or physical level to produce certain desirable effects (e.g. look a certain way or produce an emotional state). I then used a Foucauldian analysis to examine how these transformations worked to sustain *or* resist gendered power relations.

Finally, a Foucauldian analysis allowed me to consider, for example, whether fantasies of sexualisation and liberation served to regulate single female subjectivities and/or challenge such regulation, or perhaps contained multiple *competing* discourses. However I acknowledge that a significant limitation of critical discourse analysis is that the researcher is significantly involved in shaping the analysis by drawing upon their knowledge of broader social and cultural factors. (Gill, 2016a) Therefore I tried to mitigate this by considering how my own positioning affected the analysis, but this cannot be fully overcome (See Chapter 4.4).

### 4.3.3 Fantasy as an analytical lens

In this section I describe how I used fantasy as an analytical lens to bring together and consider connections and disruptions between the media representation and lived experience data. In doing so I seek to innovatively open up a more nuanced understanding of how both spheres are interconnected. Diana Fuss conceptualizes fantasy as a form of **identification** arguing that gender identities are made through fantasies of displacement – as a *desire* to be in the place of the ‘other’ and to desire what the ‘other’ desires (Fuss, 1995, p. 8) (See Chapter 3.5.1). I used this framing to identify where fantasies of becoming or (dis)identifying with the ‘other’ in self narratives and in media representations of singledom occurred and how they worked to reinforce power relations by constructing certain single subjectivities as desirable, or not. Specifically, in the interview questions, to open up a discussion of fantasies, I asked not only about the interviewees’ own identification with singledom, but whether they could think of or identified with real or fictional cultural depictions of single women (See Appendix 1).

Drawing on Berlant’s conceptualisation of fantasy as operating ideologically through a **temporal** (re)ordering (See Chapter 3.5.2), I asked women whether they see their single identity as changing in

the future and how they previously viewed being single, in comparison to the present moment (Berlant, 2011). In the analysis I considered whether this worked to construct a relationship of ‘cruel optimism’ where something which is desired, is the obstacle to your flourishing’, and to what effect. Diane Negra’s study argues that fantasies in media representations employ notions of past, present and future to achieve certain political goals and reinscribe patriarchal values, which is useful as it closely aligned to my focus on how fantasies are constructed through discourses of temporality (Negra, 2009). Negra’s feminist media analysis demonstrates how the nostalgic fantasy of ‘returning home’ appears in several Hollywood films in the late 1990s/early 2000s to render familial patriarchal structures as desirable. She argues that such films through the narrative of a woman leaving her urban career to return to her hometown, construct a return to ‘the past’ as a way of securing a happier future (Negra, 2009, pp. 18–19). While I depart from Negra’s exclusively media-based analysis I similarly analysed how notions of past, present or future are drawn upon in media texts and single women’s self-narratives to resolve a particular conflict. For example, is a positive future secured by presenting the single woman as following more traditional heteronormative structures? I then considered how this constructed certain subjectivities as being desirable, and reinscribe or challenge gendered power relations. In contrast to Negra’s more regulatory approach, my analysis, was also open to the liberatory potential of such temporal fantasies; understanding them as operating in liberatory *and* regulatory ways. Following Walkerdine’s cultural analysis, I analysed how women’s psychic desires were produced and/or regulated through such fantasies (Walkerdine, 1984).

#### **4.3.4 Integrating analysis of two data sets**

I will now outline how the two data sets were drawn together within the analysis, however this was a complex process, as the cultural representations were often varied and contradictory, and contained competing discourses. Despite this challenge, I sought to identify the connections and disruptions between the two spheres, but also retain their complexity. As outlined, I analysed the media texts first before conducting the interviews, so major themes found in the media texts could be addressed if they arose, in the interviews. For example, I paid attention to where themes of independence or self-surveillance arose in the interviews, as these were significant themes in the media analysis. However, following an inductive and deductive approach, it is important to note that I remained open to any alternative or new themes which arose in either sets of data, such as intergenerational and intersubjective regulation. Once the interviews were transcribed, I then analysed the interview data, using thematic and Foucauldian discourse analysis (as outlined above).

Fantasy was used as an analytical lens to draw both datasets together in the final stage and ask how single women take up, reinforce, reconfigure or perhaps resist, transform and construct alternative fantasies in their self-narratives of lived experience. Following the research question, I considered how the single women negotiated, or not, such cultural fantasies identified both within the media texts *and*

outside, within their lived experience. I examined how they articulated their desires and fantasies and then situated them, where relevant, in relation to cultural discourses. I analysed whether cultural fantasies were significant or not within the single women's narratives, and whether they identified with, took up or reinscribed such fantasies, or if they constructed alternative or resistant fantasies in response to these, or independently of them (although these are never fully escaped). I considered how the women made sense of these fantasies, including what mechanisms of negotiation or coping they employed in response to them. I asked what impact such fantasies had on their desires, understandings of intimate life and feminine subjectivities. I considered how they disrupted or transformed such fantasies and where they generated new or alternative fantasies. Finally, following the research question, I considered the affective and psychic resonance of the tensions between fantasies at the cultural and lived experience level.

#### **4.4 Self reflexivity and a feminist ethics**

My methodology is informed by a feminist ethics of care and empathy as opposed to an ethical 'framework', which is premised on a masculinist ideal of a separateness between the researcher and researched (Mauthner, 2002, p. 16). I attempted to always consider my own positioning during the interviews, and tried mitigate any imbalances of power, as far as possible. For example, when an interviewee became upset describing an incident of domestic abuse, I immediately paused the interview, asked if she was ok and wished to carry on, letting her know that she could suspend it, adapting my procedure according to her needs. Following Back and Denier's discussion of the role of researcher and researched (see below), I sought to be particularly sensitive by listening without judgement and offering support, responding appropriately according to the emotions expressed. Thus while it would never be possible to *become* her due to my different positioning, I could try and understand her experience (Duneier & Back, 2006). As above, I tried to allow the women as much freedom in directing the interviews as possible, emphasising the semi-structured nature and using open, guiding questions. However, there was one incident which demonstrates how the power dynamics of the interview perhaps led to a failure in rapport. An older woman several times sought to establish her position as someone who had completed a PhD and therefore had knowledge about the research process, perhaps seeking to mitigate our power imbalance. There was one moment when, trying to show empathy, I misinterpreted an answer about a film and mistakenly caused offence as she interpreted it as an attempt to discredit her opinion. This highlights the extremely personal and sensitive nature of the topic and the potentially fraught qualitative interview process where power imbalances may rise to the fore and cause a breakdown in rapport.

Yet the emphasis in feminist research on qualitative interviewing as a reciprocal, non-hierarchical transaction, where the researcher does not seek to be an impartial outside observer, but build empathy between the researcher and researched is not unproblematic (Oakley, 2016). As the researcher, I am



always implicated in unequal power hierarchies of researcher and researched, and this cannot be *fully* overcome (Burgess-Proctor, 2015; Rich, 1980). I tried to be aware of how my positioning as a white, middle class researcher based at a large Western academic institution, only serves to reinforce my privilege over the interviewee (Alcoff, 1992). Each of the accounts presented here are inherently shaped by the unique dynamic produced by my presence and exchange with each interviewee, by the guiding questions I asked and how I asked them. I understand subjectivity as being produced relationally, meaning that subjectivity is not a static, unified and singular ‘object’ to be discovered (consistent with a Foucauldian understanding of subjectivity) but continually produced between the researcher and researched in the discursive event of the interview (Darling-Wolf, 1998).

When conducting the analysis, I was caught within what Gill and Herdieckerhoff highlight as an ethical feminist dilemma. Discourse analysis necessarily objectifies and distances the object of study, rather than empowers it, which is antithetical to feminist goals of radical social change (Gill & Herdieckerhoff, 2006). I tried to reduce the distancing and objectifying of my interviewees by incorporating and retaining their agency and voice within the research process, as far as possible. Feminist media studies scholarship argues that the viewing of media texts is a dynamic, dialogical encounter, where the viewer is engaged in self-referential forms of gendered viewing and gendered subjectivity formation (Wood, 2009). I draw on Helen Wood’s suggestion that consumption of media constitutes a form of gendered performativity where the self is reflexively constructed through the engagement with media, as part of a communicative act. When I was analysing the texts, it is inevitable that my gendered subjectivity and affective response was constitutive of the process rather than something I could step outside. For example, as discussed in Chapter 1.1, my own experiences of singledom as featuring a rich variety of personal relationships, while also perceiving a narrowness within popular cultural depictions of intimate life and my feminist politics, will have fundamentally shaped my encounter.

Indeed, my position, experience and emotional response to the research has an inescapable impact on *all* aspects of the design, selection of material, representation of participants and analysis. I have tried to be as open as possible about such influences and limitations. The writing of the thesis was poignant in its timing as I was deeply socially isolated due to the Covid-19 pandemic, therefore while it is not possible to speak from outside this location, I acknowledge that my own feelings of social isolation due to the pandemic, which are normally infrequent, will have had an impact on the analysis, which involved examining this an analytical category. I was careful to try and identify where my own feminist views, often more positively orientated towards singledom and grounded in a belief in the potentially liberatory opportunities of singledom, might have influenced my interpretation. I thus tried to pay close attention to where the interviewees’ accounts may have differed from this, or not. I attempted to sensitively convey as accurately as possible the complexity and nuance of the accounts, and that the huge range of emotions expressed were encapsulated.

As the research involves human subjects, interviewees were selected, and interviews were conducted in adherence with the LSE Research Ethics Review form, to ensure that interviewees were low risk and not vulnerable, and I received approval by the LSE Ethic Committee. The nature of the research was disclosed via an Information for Participants form (See Appendix 2). They were guided through and asked to sign a consent form, before the interview. Interviewees were given default anonymity, with pseudonyms and personal identifying information removed. They were told they could withdraw from the project at any time. All data was securely stored in Word Document, audio or NVivo software files on password-protected devices, and signed forms kept in a locked cabinet. Interviewees were also informed of how anonymised data/analysis would be shared in the future, and promised a copy of the published thesis, where requested. For the media texts analysis, I followed the LSE's Ethical Guidelines for Research Online<sup>25</sup> which states that consent is not required where content does not relate to identifiable living persons.

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have explained why I am drawing on popular cultural media representations and self-narratives of single women to investigate the *tension* which exists between cultural fantasies of the single woman, and single women's lived experience. While I use thematic analysis to identify salient themes and tropes, I argue that combining this with Foucauldian discourse analysis incorporates a close, in-depth, critical analysis of how discourses of singledom at the cultural level and lived experience sustain the operation of gendered power structures. This is highly relevant to my research focus, which seeks to discover how regulatory norms femininity may be performatively sustained but also transformed, threatened or undone through discursive fantasies surrounding the single woman. Fantasy as an analytical lens offers me a way of analytically drawing the two data sets together, and incorporates a more nuanced understanding of how feminine subjectivity is formed at the discursive, social, cultural and psychic level. A Foucauldian discourse analysis also provides an understanding of how discourses of subjectivity are produced within specific social and historical locations. It also for an intersectional analysis which investigates how multiple feminine subject positions are being interpellated within power structures in various ways.

My research design, while not representative, allows for exploration of how key tropes of single femininities are being constructed across multiple media genres as part of a broader systematic patterning. It understands such repetition as indicating significance and locates each text within its particular genre. While an alternative approach could have examined one media genre or a single category of age, race or class of single femininity in depth, my study explores how these categories and

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<sup>25</sup> <https://info.lse.ac.uk/staff/services/Policies-and-procedures/Assets/Documents/resEthPolPro.pdf>

genres work together, opening up a broader, complex understanding of how single femininities are being constructed and experienced. And while the scope of my project means that depictions of certain groups such as single mothers, divorcees or widows are excluded, this offers a way of narrowing what is a broad category and highlighting the particular experiences of non-divorced/widow and childless singles. While my media texts are mass media representations, limited by their omission of older, black and ethnic minority and working-class single femininities, alternative genres, such as social media, would be an important site for future research to address if these could be found (See Chapter 8, Conclusion).

Through my methodology I seek to strengthen and deepen our understanding of how cultural discourses may pervasively influence and impact on individual subjectivities, while also innovatively opening up a more nuanced analysis of how both spheres are interconnected, using the lens of fantasy. Continuing in the feminist tradition, my methodology also contributes further to investigating the diverse lived experience of singledom and illuminating those subjugated knowledges that are grounded in everyday experience (Abu-Lughod, 1993). My methodology also addresses a bias towards US scholarship examining the lived experience of singledom (Depaulo & Morris, 2005; Rodie, 2006; K. D. Williams & Nida, 2005) and the critical neglect of how marginalised single femininities are being experienced in the contemporary UK context, with its distinct particularities.

One limitation of my Foucauldian discursive analysis is that I have had to draw on my own knowledge of broader social and cultural factors, which will have inevitably shaped the research (Gill, 2016). It also objectifies and distances the object of study, rather than empowers it. The unequal power hierarchies of the interview method have also profoundly structured my project. However, I have overcome these limitations as far as possible by reflexively situating my positioning and considering what implications this has had. While the interview sample was diverse in terms of age, race, sexuality and class, my research has been restricted by a lack of transgender women. This inevitably prevents fuller examination of how single femininity is constructed in perhaps more radical ways outside the (cis)gender binary, however such an important exploration would perhaps merit its own extensive investigation. I have interviewed women living in London as it offers a rich range of class, race, sexuality and age groups, yet I acknowledge that the city represents a particular, more left-wing, political climate and the inclusion of women from another location would offer a different account.

The next chapter presents the first set of my empirical findings. In this, I introduce what is constructed as the 'ideal' feminine single subject, configured through celebratory discourses of freedom, independence and autonomy. The second empirical chapter argues that paradoxically this 'successful' single subject is only achieved through intensive self-surveillance. Finally, the third empirical chapter examines what happens when the single subject fails to adequately self-survey, and is produced through processes of abjection.

## Chapter 5. Fantasies of freedom: independence and the ‘successful’ single subject

### 5.1 Introduction

In this first empirical chapter, I examine how media representations construct the ‘successful’ single woman through discourses of freedom, and how, in turn, my interviewees took up and negotiated these discourses to account for their lived experience. Both the media narratives and interviewees’ accounts drew on masculinised and postfeminist discourses, to construct *desirable* single femininity as an independent, agentic and autonomous subject<sup>26</sup>. In the media representations, fantasies of ‘independence’ operated in multiple, largely regulatory ways, to narrowly define constructions of single femininity. Successful singledom was constructed as independent primarily through themes of emotional detachment, self-reliance and self-sufficiency. Yet in the interview accounts, while the women aspired to such independence, they simultaneously expressed a desire to be socially connected – a contradiction that created significant psychic tension. Indeed, several women expressed the desire to adhere to, or maintain a proximity, to romance narratives and the coupled norm.

The media discourses depicted ‘successful’ single subjects as *economically* independent and freedom was limited to professional advancement (for the middle-class single woman) and consumption practices. Once more, the interview accounts revealed a more complex relationship to the themes of economic freedom and consumption. While many of the women appropriated discourses of professional freedom and independence and talked of how singledom afforded the freedom to consume, there were important class distinctions. The less well-off women found discourses of economic freedom deeply regulating and instead highlighted the economic limitations placed on them by singledom. Less well-off single women discussed the economic precarity of having only one household income, particularly in relation to housing costs. Yet while the middle-class women told of how they enjoyed consuming and cultivating a lifestyle of their choosing, they found mediated discourses of consumption – particularly in relation to the body – very distressing. Several interviewees expressed disagreement with these discourses, and some discussed strategies of avoidance.

Discourses of freedom were also deeply intersected with age. Successful single femininity was distinctly youthful, with older independent single femininity conversely rendered undesirable. In the media representations, independence was only to be enjoyed *temporarily* by younger singles and was something to be feared in older age, reframed more negatively as social isolation. And while cultivating freedom

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<sup>26</sup> Similar themes were found within postfeminist media by Elias et al., 2017; Gill, 2007.

was linked conversely to maturity, this was only as part of progression into eventual coupledness. In the single women's narratives, while younger singles took up such temporal fantasies of future isolation, older singles were more ambivalent towards independence. They told of a more diverse form of independence which broke from those commonly depicted in representations, seeing independence as offering both social connection *and* isolation.

However, within the media representations and the women's accounts, discourses of freedom and independence also operated in more transformative ways to challenge gendered structures of power. In particular, when discourses of sexual freedom were articulated in relation to liminal non-heterosexual, working class and racial and ethnic minority women in the media representations, they troubled and destabilised gendered and coupled norms. Once more, the interview accounts revealed a complex approach to liberatory mediated constructions of sexual autonomy. Several women aspired to such transcendent relationship formations, while *also* maintaining a conflicted attachment to the coupled norm and to romance narratives. Yet a few interviewees spoke of a transformatory freedom to enjoy multiple non-monogamous sexual partners or construct alternative relationship formations in ways which troubled the single/coupled binary and challenged patriarchal gender norms.

In what follows, I examine how discourses of freedom and independence emerge across the media representations. I then show how these are negotiated within the interviewees' accounts and how they are resisted and at times transformed. I conclude by proposing that the 'freedom' of the successful single subject is paradoxically achieved through intensive processes of self-surveillance, regulation and self-transformation, themes I explore further in Chapter 2.

## **5.2 Media representations**

### **5.2.1 Emotional detachment and social isolation**

In line with contemporary postfeminist culture (see Chapter 1.4), fantasies of freedom, independence and autonomy were celebrated and rendered highly desirable across the media representations I analysed. These discourses operated primarily as an *affective* state, where the single subject was required to quickly emotionally detach and develop into an independent, confident, free subject to the extent that bordered on social isolation. Freedom was also constructed as a temporary state, to be enjoyed only by younger singles. Yet, as I will show, this construction not only sustains masculinised ideals of independence but also perpetuates the abjection of single women's emotional attachments as *always* being dysfunctional.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the non-romantic, non-sexual relationships of single women – for example, caring for children, close friendships with women or gay men – have historically been constructed as

emotionally dysfunctional, or as borne out of the suppression of homoerotic desire (King, 2014; Spooner, 2001). This type of relationship has been constructed as channelling single women's 'natural' caring instincts and desire for romantic love into alternative, unnatural and 'unhealthy' bonds. These themes are re-emerging and being reconfigured in contemporary representations. However, rather than merely denigrating and pathologizing the single woman as emotionally over-attached, contemporary texts simultaneously celebrate her independence *and* require her not to become too independent. I start showing this dual ideological work by demonstrating how the single woman is seen struggling, and at times succeeding, to emotionally detach from her ex-partners and become a 'successful' independent subject by discussing the television programme *Chewing Gum* and the film *How to Be Single* (*HTBS*). I then reveal how she is chastised if she emotionally detaches too quickly, or becomes *too* emotionally independent, using the example of the film *Frances Ha*.

The single woman is denigrated if she remains emotionally attached to an ex-partner for too long and fails to emotionally detach within a short period of time<sup>27</sup>. We see this in two characters: Tracey in *Chewing Gum*, who can only achieve such a state through fantasising about being over her ex-boyfriend, and Alice in *HTBS*. The narrative arc of *HTBS* is centred around her struggling to detach from her ex, Josh, but at the very end she triumphantly does so. As we will see in Chapter 6, for most of the film Alice 'fails' as a single subject, chastised by her friends for thinking about Josh, and positioned as sad and lonely, until she transforms herself into a self-sufficient, independent subject, culminating in a solo trek of the Grand Canyon (See Chapter 5.2.3 below for a full discussion). Similarly to Alice in *HTBS*, Tracey is unhealthily consumed and preoccupied by her former partner, Connor, and fails to cultivate emotional detachment from him. Yet Tracey's portrayal is more complex than Alice's and so warrants closer analysis, with themes of empowerment and humiliation intertwined in her detachment. For Tracey, detachment only occurs in her *fantasy* life and is never achieved in real life.

*Chewing Gum* is a TV comedy starring a 24-year-old heterosexual single black woman called Tracey. It features a predominantly ethnic minority cast in working-class London community and falls within 'chick culture' – TV deliberately addressed towards women<sup>28</sup> (Taylor, 2012, p. 57). By contrast to *HTBS*, which is a mainstream blockbuster film, as a small-screen TV production, it has a more open, less unitary, narrative structure, which offers more chance for development of the storyline in different, more complex directions (Fiske, 2010). In Series Two, Tracey works to cultivate a close friendship with Connor which is not *too* close. In a pivotal scene in Episode 1, she daydreams about Connor while playing with some miniature dolls:

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<sup>27</sup> Such themes were repeated across *Elle Magazine*.

<sup>28</sup> *Chewing Gum*'s debut episode drew an audience which was two-thirds female (Farber, 2015).

Tracey: [as a doll] Oh, my God! Connor. Connor, it's Tracey! Yeah, no, no, no. I know I look different now, yeah, I've become successful, yas. Who is this? Is this wide-legged hyena your new girlfriend? Oh, my God! No, no, no! I just can't believe you've moved on so quickly.

Connor [as a doll]: I haven't, Trace. I haven't moved on. I love ya, please help me, help me.

Tracey: [as a doll] Oh, my God, no, no, no, don't cry. Look, I wish I could, but I've actually got to go and see Beyoncé. No, no, no, really, I'm going to fly there. Oh, yeah, cos I can fly. I'm flying! I'm flying, I'm flying! I'm fly...

Here, Tracey constructs a self-empowering fantasy where 'success' sees her becoming a stronger, confident independent version of herself who has 'moved on' through her emotional detachment; she is now 'free' to 'fly away'. Whereas Connor is the one who is left behind, emotionally distraught and still attached to her. Her fantasy subverts gender norms of an autonomous independent agentic subject as masculinised and dependency as feminised (Fraser & Gordon, 2002). In it, she transforms herself into someone with supernatural powers, who can mingle with superstars such as Beyoncé, and can reject Connor. But Tracey is interrupted, mid-word by the real Connor, who has been watching her for an unknown amount of time. The fact that Connor catches her suggests that in reality, it is the opposite, and she experiences a deeper sense of humiliation. Not only is she humiliated by the *content* of her fantasy but by the fact that he sees her, displaying an 'incorrect' form of obsessive over-attachment. While it is humorous, the humour is not used in an 'unruly' way to transform gendered tropes of the single woman, but instead reinscribes her as emotionally dysfunctional (Rowe, 1995). The scene echoes Berger's 'ways of seeing', which argues that women watch themselves being watched by men, internalising this self-gaze as part of their feminine identity which shapes their relationship to themselves (Berger, 1972). Thus, Tracey can be seen not only literally being watched by Connor (and by us, the viewers) but also watching herself; her actions can be interpreted as an identification with this regulatory gaze, which is subverted through her fantasy, where she gains power over Connor. As Berger argues, any act of looking at an image involves picturing ourselves within it, this can be extended to the series as a whole, where the female audience is frequently addressed (see below) and invited to survey Tracey, and themselves.

Yet in contemporary media representations, the single woman is also presented as pathologically cold and emotionless if she moves on too fast and *immediately* disengages from her past relationships. By contrast to Alice and Tracey, Frances in the comedy film *Frances Ha* is penalised for her cold detachment from her ex-boyfriend, and desire to immediately enjoy her single 'freedom'. At the beginning of the film, she breaks up with her boyfriend because he wants to move in together; he is visibly upset but Frances is not. She interrupts their emotional break up conversation by taking a call from her friend Sophie where they joke and laugh together. Later that evening Frances and Sophie talk about his shortcomings as a partner in a humiliating way after she accepts another man's number at a party. Discussing this with Sophie she betrays a lack of guilt:

Frances: 'I should feel bad I went to that party....'

Sophie: 'You deserved it. You just got out of relationship jail.'

Rather than *actually* feeling bad, Frances guiltily describes how she 'should' feel bad. Yet Sophie's comment of her having gotten 'out of relationship jail' also constructs her singledom as freedom. But she then chastises Frances for being *too* emotionally detached from her ex-boyfriend, and getting another man's number. Thus, Frances is disciplined for *not* maintaining an emotional attachment, at least briefly, to her ex-boyfriend. In short, the normative message in the three examples discussed – *Chewing Gum*, *HTBS*, and *Frances Ha* – is that the single female subject must become emotionally detached from their ex-partners, but not too quickly. She is denigrated both as dysfunctional for not moving on quickly *and* for transforming into an emotionally detached subject immediately.

### **5.2.2 Economic freedoms: Professionalism, consumption and lifestyle**

One of the key ways through which the independence and emotional detachment of the single woman is celebrated within contemporary media texts such as TV shows *The Bridge*, *Fargo* and *Elle magazine* is through discourses linked to economic freedom. Specifically, the freedom of single femininity is largely confined to freedoms of professionalism and consumption.

#### *Professionalism*

In contemporary media representations, the success of the (middle class) single women is often associated with a career. Representations of urban professional middle-class single women have proliferated in popular cultural discourses since the mid-1990s (Negra, 2004). However, as Taylor argues while the professional single woman often *appears* to be a recuperative figure, she is still rendered 'troublesome' (Taylor, 2012, p. 58). As I demonstrate, the trope of the single career woman is acutely represented through the liminal figure of the single female detective, where not only does her professionalism afford her 'freedom', but her social isolation and emotional detachment is implied to *enable* her professionalism.

The detective is a liminal figure, operating in an objective, cold, unemotional manner, isolated by their genius (Klein, 1988, p. 10). Furthermore, since the detective genre has historically been almost exclusively male, representing the 'incarnation of masculine rationality' (Munt, 1998), the female detective is even more liminal. Thus, it is her liminality which allows her to trouble the boundaries of femininity. Kathryn Rowe argues that in contemporary popular culture the 'unruly' woman derives power from her proximity to the boundaries of normative femininity (Rowe, 1995) (See also Chapter 7.2.3.2).



This liminality is epitomised in the character of Saga Norén in the Danish crime drama series *The Bridge*. Saga is a highly-focused, bright and committed detective. Yet her depiction as a successful detective is inseparable from, and is shown to depend on, chronic repudiation of her emotions, alluding to her having a mental disorder. Although this is never disclosed<sup>4</sup>, Saga displays behavioural characteristics associated with neurodiversity, such as Asperger's, a form of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). In clinical discourse this is defined as 'abnormal' verbal or nonverbal communication, social isolation (Holton, 2013, pp. 46, 48) and a 'machine-like absence of emotion' (Bumiller, 2008, p. 970).

For instance, in the first scene of *The Bridge*, we see a woman begging Saga to let her drive through a crime scene because her husband needs lifesaving surgery. Saga responds in a cold, unempathetic manner and insists the rules must be followed. Saga is also shown interrogating witnesses while they are in hospital, showing no thought for their welfare. In S1 E5, she forces a teenage witness who is in intensive care to give evidence during a brief moment of consciousness. When she falters, Saga urges her to keep going, dismissing her concerns that she is dying. Seconds later she dies, and Saga only shows a flicker of concern that she may have been instrumental in her death. In doing so, she is constructed as deeply insensitive and unable to sympathize with others' vulnerability. She shows an almost pathological or deviant *absence* of emotion, which reinvigorates historical tropes of the detective genre and single femininity as emotionally dysfunctional (Hutton, 1937; Klein, 1988).

However, while Saga's emotional detachment is shown as extreme, negative and masculinised, her isolation is concurrently implied to be what *enables* her professionalism. For example, in S1 E3, when discussing her promotion prospects with her boss, Hans, Saga links her singledom to her professionalism, namely her emotionless, rational ability to focus and plan: Hans: 'Whoever takes over, will appreciate having you here.' Saga: 'Extremely focused. Single. Successful. Clearly defined targets. Good at planning?' Hans: 'Exactly.' Following the masculinised logic of the detective genre, where the detective's professional expertise and ability to solve cases stems from their cold rationality, unclouded by emotions, Saga is granted success, but is penalised for failing to conform to feminized norms of emotional intelligence and empathy (Munt, 1998, p. 7).

A more complex variation of the single woman's emotional detachment being linked to professional expertise can be seen in the character of Molly Solverson, deputy chief of the police department in the small town of Bemidji in *Fargo* (See Chapter 4.2.2). Molly is not shown as socially isolated within her community, but she does live alone and in E3 describes herself as: 'An old ship captain. You know, I'm married to the sea', drawing upon historical asexualising 'old maid' tropes (Froide, 2005). While she enjoys a close relationship with her father, she often dismisses him to prioritise her career. In E1, Molly resists her father's emotional appeal to give up her 'dangerous' job, turning down a weekend together in favour of the office. Unlike Saga, Molly is firm not cold in her dismissal of him, but once more, the

single female detective must isolate and detach herself to prioritize work, and her professional success is incompatible with intimate sexual and familial bonds.

Such incompatibility is presented most starkly at the end of *Fargo*. There is a timeskip during which Molly marries another police officer, Gus, and falls pregnant. During her pregnancy, Molly becomes distanced from the case and her family ties are constructed as incompatible with her career, something which can only be advanced while she is *fully* independent. In the closing episode, Gus pressurises her to stay away from the case, justifying Molly's role as stepmother to his daughter as the reason for her not doing her job. He must track down killer, in order to protect the family, unconcerned about the impact of putting his *own* life in danger. Molly adopts what McRobbie dubs the postfeminist 'mask of feminine submissiveness where aggression against male dominance is sublimated in favour of marriage and motherhood,' (McRobbie, 2007, p. 732), and submits to her husband's request. Molly is required in this 'sexual contract' not to challenge Gus's absence from the home, but to return there herself.

Molly is eventually promoted to chief, but she is shown renouncing recognition of her achievements in favour of her husband. In the final scene of Season 1, which evokes fantasies of the familial norm, she is shown sitting on the sofa, heavily pregnant, cuddling her husband and stepdaughter. 'Gus: They're gonna give me a citation for bravery... They really should be giving it to you. Molly: No. No, this is your deal. I get to be chief. Molly gets individualised recognition – rather than the symbolic, collective recognition which her husband receives, reinscribing gender hierarchies. Molly ends the series off work and pregnant, her career 'forever' paused by her coupled state, consistent with postfeminist logics where reproduction is incompatible with career success (McRobbie, 2007, p. 273). Intimacy, emotional attachment and domesticity are re-sutured to femininity, coupledness is recentred and Molly's threat to patriarchal gender hierarchies which she posed as a single, professional and independent woman, is foreclosed.

### *Consumption*

Successful singledom is often signified through the freedom to consume and the cultivation of a particular consumer lifestyle (Lazar, 2009). As Taylor argues, this continues a postfeminist theme of glorification of conspicuous consumption in shows such as *Sex and the City* which 'position the act of consumption as the key marker of the single woman's independence' (Taylor, 2012, p. 64). This is evident in the special 'Single Lady' edition of *Elle*, where singledom is reduced to a commoditized, middle-class identity or lifestyle (Gill, 2016, p. 618) (See Chapter 4.2.2). The consumer magazine genre is hyper visual and sees a convergence of femininity and consumerist culture, driven and shaped by commercial forces (Favaro, 2017). As the introductory paragraph for every article says:

*ELLE.com will be celebrating the modern-era single lady—from the way she's portrayed in media to the kick-ass things she does (that have zilch to do with relationship status) to the way she Treats. Her. Self.'*

The final line directly links singledom to consumerism – emphasised by capitalisation and full stops. Drawing on 'Love Your Body' discourses (Gill & Elias, 2014), the primary way in which the single woman is incited to 'treat herself' and cultivate an empowering 'self-love' in the magazine is through fantasies of internalised consumption (Dejmanee, 2016). One article lists gifts for women to buy themselves as an (economically) independent person. The headline, 'Treat Yo Self. Gifts that will make you glad you're single: the kind of self-love money can buy', suggests that not only must consumption be valued, there is a need to compensate, and to make up for the 'lack' of being single; something only achievable by higher socio-economic subjects. The article urges the reader to buy expensive items with captions that draw upon individualised discourses of freedom, such as being 'free' from having to consider others. One caption next to a pair of shoes, reads: 'Playful Platforms: Your old S.O. may have never understood the clunky shoe trend, but who cares?' and 'Scented Candles: That fragrance your ex was allergic to? Now you can buy it in bulk'. While it is mostly freedom from a former partner which is emphasised, this is extended to freedom from any social ties: 'An It-Investment bag: Go ahead and buy the It Bag. Who's stopping you?'. No longer having to ensure they are attractive to a partner, the caption stresses that women can buy clothes simply because *they* like them: 'A hyper-feminine jumpsuit: A baby-blue jumpsuit doesn't exactly scream "come hither" but it's probably exactly what you want to be wearing when you're out having fun.' The 'baby-blue' colour reinscribes an infantilising, girly femininity (Gill & Elias, 2014). Another article intertwines consumption with the body and hypersexualisation, listing beauty products to be used the morning after a one-night stand to ensure the single women maintains her sexually attractiveness.

Thus, the freedom articulated through these economic discourses is highly regulatory and constructed in narrow ways. Professional freedom can be enjoyed only if close relationships are foregone, and 'empowerment' is reduced to the power to consume in ways which reinscribe postfeminist norms of hypersexualised, individualised femininity and obscure lower socio-economic classes who cannot afford to consume (Lazar, 2009). In the next section I develop this to show how discourses of freedom are also temporally limited – the (younger) single must 'mature' into coupledness within a certain timeframe, or risk being 'stalled' in her development and fail to adequately self-govern (Lahad, 2016b).

### **5.2.3 Limits of freedom: temporal restrictions**

At the same time that freedom is emphasised in the construction of the single woman, it is only celebrated as a *temporary* state, often as preparation for entering a non-independent, heterosexually coupled relationship. This can be vividly seen in the closing scene of *How to Be Single*, when Alice is

shown fulfilling her long-held dream of self-sufficiently hiking the Grand Canyon alone, something which she did not do before because she was in a relationship. Her voiceover consolidates her ‘successful’ embrace and celebration of her ‘independence’, urging the audience to do the same:

Alice: ‘The thing about being single is, you should cherish it. Because, in a week, or a lifetime of being alone, you may only get one moment. One moment, when you’re not tied up in a relationship with anyone. A parent, a pet, a sibling, a friend. One moment, when you stand on your own. Really, truly single. And then, it’s gone.’

As the credits roll, the song which plays features the lyrics ‘I am ok and I don’t need anyone else,’ reemphasising a celebration of the independent, self-sufficient single subject. But singledom is constructed here as a fleeting fantasy – as ‘one brief moment’ to fulfil your dreams, and as something which must be cherished *because* of its limited timeframe. Such freedom from being ‘tied up’ is to be celebrated *only* because it is a state which inevitably does not – must not – become permanent and instead must be terminated through romantic coupledness. In the climatic closing scene, Alice’s voiceover cautions the viewer against unnecessarily prolonging their independence: ‘Isn’t there a danger that you’ll get so good at being single, so set in your ways that you’ll miss out on the chance to be with somebody great?’ Thus, the performance of a successful single femininity operates temporarily, with the single subject making sure she doesn’t stay single for too long in case she gets ‘too good’ at it, and becomes a long-term single. Alice ends the film by calling on single women to ensure they remain ready to move onto heteronormative coupledness, presented as naturally following a linear temporal order (Lahad, 2017).

#### *Intersections of age: temporary versus permanent freedoms*

Independence was temporally positioned in the media texts as something for younger singles only, to be achieved as part of a process of moving from *immaturity* to *maturity*, with permanent independence, by implication, to be avoided. Indeed, it is notable that almost all of women in the media representations that I analysed were in their twenties or thirties. This suggests that older women can no longer enjoy freedom as a temporary, brief state before moving into coupledness, instead becoming permanently stuck, unable to develop – a state which Lahad terms ‘late singledom’ (Lahad, 2017, p. 35). For younger singles there is ‘time’ for them to mature according to the correct temporal limits of coupling while they are still of reproductive age.

For example, in the first half of the film, *Frances Ha*, Frances enjoys an intense relationship with Sophie, and during this ‘dependent’ period she is described by others as being ‘stalled’ within her development towards independent adulthood. Frances is shown as immature, irresponsible and economically vulnerable, and relies on others to help her, reinscribing historical tropes. She struggles to cope with

‘adult’ responsibilities such as paying her bills and rent; she recklessly buys a flight to Paris on credit even though she is broke. When she gets into financial trouble due to her precarious work situation as an apprentice, she rents a room from some wealthier peers, who help her by charging a reduced rent. Thus while Frances is an economically vulnerable single subject, she can exploit her upper-middle class connections as a form of social security, obscuring how working class single femininities would be left reliant on state support or made homeless. One evening, a friend brings up Frances’s age, and both the friend and Benji claim that not only does she *look* older, she acts younger:

Ness: Aren't you a lot older than Sophie?

Frances: No. We went to college together.

Ness: Hmm. You seem older.

Frances: I'm a couple months older.

Ness: Like, a lot older... but less, like, grown up. It's weird. You have an older face.

Benji: But, like, you don't have your shit together.

In line with postfeminist logics of success (Genz, 2017, p. 18), Frances is stalled in a position where she hasn’t ‘yet’ managed to take personal responsibility for the precarities in her life. Her singledom is constructed as an immature, temporal state which must be agentially moved on from within a certain time frame in order to fulfill the norms of femininity (Lahad, 2016, p. 3). Frances is penalised for failing to comply and risks the threat of looking like, and becoming, an ‘old maid’ before her time.

Yet this is disrupted in the second half of the film when Sophie gets engaged to her boyfriend and moves abroad. Left ‘alone’, we see Frances transform into a more ‘mature’ independent subject. Thus, the secondary trajectory of the film is Frances’ required self-transformation towards economic and professional independence. Frances becomes more self-disciplined, expressing regret over her spending. She forces herself to become more agentic, asking her boss for extra work. When she discovers that Sophie is moving to Tokyo, she’s finally pushed into self-developing her career and develops her own dance show. In the final montage of the film we see her transition into a successful single by putting on her own production and moving into own flat<sup>29</sup>. This offers a deeply individualized, privileged, classed form of agency, which draws on postfeminist discourses of self-empowerment as professional and economic achievement (Banet-Weiser, 2017).

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<sup>29</sup> The title of the film is taken from when Frances moves into her new flat. Her name ‘Halliday’ doesn’t fit in her new mailbox, and is shortened to ‘Ha’ symbolising the importance of her apartment in representing her single identity. See also Wojcik (2013).

Yet while the majority of representations presented independence in deeply regulatory ways, in the next section, I show examples where independence was constructed as truly liberating and worked to trouble the norms of feminine subjectivity.

#### **5.2.4 Subversive freedoms: transforming the coupled and feminine norm**

Amidst the regulatory discourses of freedom which narrowly construct and reinscribe gendered and coupled norms, there were more subversive forms of freedom which conversely challenged these normative structures. In certain moments, the mediated figure of the single woman served to decentre heterosexual, romantic love (Cronin, 2015; Wilkinson, 2014) and recentre friendship and platonic kinship networks (Budgeon, 2006). The central characters in *Frances Ha* subvert and reconfigure the norms of singledom to create a transgressive, liberatory single feminine subject. The film mirrors the tension of the romantic comedy genre which charts the ups and downs of a romantic couple relationship, but instead does so through the platonic friendship of Frances and Sophie. It begins with a montage of Frances and Sophie which shows them as sharing a level of intimacy normally reserved exclusively for cohabiting sexual couples (Cronin, 2015): sharing a bed together, cooking together, exercising together, play fighting, reading to one another, sharing cigarettes, nagging one another, and falling asleep on the sofa together. The significance and intensity of their relationship is spelled out in one early scene, where they are sitting in bed together late at night:

Frances: Tell me the story of us.

Sophie: Again? All right, Frances. We are gonna take over the world.

Frances: You'll be this awesomely bitchy publishing mogul.

Sophie: And you'll be this famous modern dancer... and I'll publish a really expensive book about you.

Frances: That d-bags we make fun of will put on their coffee tables.

Sophie: And we'll co-own a vacation apartment in Paris.

Frances: And we'll have lovers.

Sophie: And no children.

Frances: And we'll speak at college graduations.

Sophie: And [have] honorary degrees.

This fantasy of 'the good life' (Ahmed, 2010) – the story of 'us' – shows their relationship as the primary structuring force in their lives, troubling the romantic coupled norm. Their professional and financial success is secondary, it rejects a postfeminist sensibility which prioritises careers over intimate life. Rather than describing *themselves* in this fantasy, they describe each other, lapsing into the collective 'we', showing a complete integration of their identities. They enjoy sexual autonomy, having lovers but no regular romantic partner, and do not commit to anyone else, explicitly rejecting motherhood. In fact,

the only form of commitment this fantasy shows is a non-essential middle-class financial one of co-owning a holiday apartment. The story has been told multiple times, as Frances asks for it ‘again’, and is recounted by both with ease, which demonstrates the level of investment they have placed in it, reciting it like a mantra. Yet it is telling that Frances is the one urging for it to be told ‘again’, suggesting that she, the single one, is more invested.

Gendered structures of power are transformed through the freedom of sexual autonomy when intersected with non-heterosexual and minority racial identities. In *The Good Wife*, Kalinda is presented as a highly autonomous and desiring (bi)sexual subject (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2007). She celebrates postfeminist fantasies of ‘liberalised’ sexual freedom by engaging in multiple non-monogamous relationships. Embodying Angela McRobbie’s ‘Phallic Girl’ she is ‘in possession of a healthy sexual appetite, and identity’ and ‘emulates the assertive, hedonistic styles of sexuality associated with young men’ (McRobbie, 2007, pp. 731–732). Yet Kalinda is also hypersexualized: she wears tight, sexualized clothing and as an ethnic minority, she has to negotiate racialized discourses which have historically othered non-white women as hypersexualized and deviant. But it is perhaps her proximity to the borders of normative femininity, which allows her to make such a challenge through her ‘unruly’ promiscuity (Rowe, 1995; West, 2008). Her liminal positioning, not only as a female detective but as an Indian bisexual, allows Kalinda to subvert white heterosexual femininity and the monogamous coupled norm.

In contrast, it is Kalinda’s *heterosexual* relations that are constructed as problematic, tarnished with emotional dysfunction, bordering on being physically and emotionally abusive. In S4 E3, Kalinda’s relationships collide when she bumps into her ex-husband Nick speaking to her lover, Lana. Afterwards, in the following exchange, her heterosexual relationship is shown as being emotionally manipulative and threatening:

Nick: I know you tried a lot of things when I was away, and I forgive you.

Kalinda: Thanks.

Nick: Yep. Don’t change. You belong to me. I belong to you. And I know where your girlfriend lives.

Kalinda: I’d like to see you try.

Nick: I don’t think you would.

Kalinda: Oh, I would. She’s a federal agent.

Nick derogates Kalinda’s same-sex relationship, laying claim to her as if she is an object to possess, positioning her bisexuality as a momentary lapse in her heterosexuality. Kalinda responds by employing her (bi)sexual autonomy to actively resist hypersexualisation and heteronormative subjectification by her husband. Yet Kalinda troubles if not transforms such regulatory boundaries when she engages in multiple bisexual, non-monogamous relationships. She does not remain within the boundaries of the

‘Phallic Girl’, which requires her to fear the slur of lesbianism (McRobbie, 2007, p. 732) and she enjoys several female partners. Kalinda’s non-monogamous non-heterosexual relationships are presented as fulfilling, and challenge the normative ideals of femininity as heterosexual and monogamous (Willey, 2014). While her casual relationships with women are decentred in the show in comparison to the one with her ex, her engagements with women are largely positive. Instead of being pursued and harassed by unwanted attention from Nick, she negotiates her same-sex relationships on an equal footing. In such moments she breaks with dominant discourses of white, female heterosexual singledom and foregrounds a transgressive autonomous sexuality which, rather than reinscribing the coupled norm, deeply challenges the single/coupled binary. Kalinda’s positioning outside the racial, sexual and coupled norms of femininity allows offers moments of transgression, where heterosexual femininity and the monogamous coupled norm are subverted through a more radical ‘unruly’ sexuality.

Thus, contemporary representations of single women such as those I have discussed, offer a vision which separates a normative understanding of the ‘good life’ from a ‘historic privileging of heterosexual conduct as expressed in romantic love and coupledness,’ (Ahmed, 2010, p. 90) and directs it towards platonic friendship or sexual autonomy. This vision also breaks with the requirement to reproduce the family form through children (Ahmed, 2010, p. 48): indeed, the characters are all radically dissociated from motherhood, with Frances and Sophie constructing motherhood as undesirable. Having examined how themes of independence have emerged in the media representations I now go on to explore how the single women interviewed negotiated these cultural discourses.

### **5.3 Single women’s narratives**

#### **5.3.1 Emotional detachment and (re)attachments**

My interviewees actively took up, negotiated, as well as resisted and challenged cultural fantasies of independence and freedom circulating in contemporary media and culture in relation to the single woman. Almost all emphasised independence as one of the most valued aspects of their single subjectivity and actively embraced notions of independence, autonomy and emotional detachment which, as I have shown, are central in media representations. Yet in the majority of accounts, these themes were presented in a more nuanced, complex way, *alongside* desire for emotional connection and the possibility of future romantic connection, demonstrating a certain ambivalence or at times even resistance towards these popular discourses. Echoing the construction of singledom as a temporary state to be enjoyed *en route* to coupledness, many of the younger women said that while they valued their independence now, they did not anticipate enjoying this for long, going so far as to say that they feared independence later in life. The younger interviewees often acknowledged such fears were located in, and stemmed from, cultural representations of single femininity. Yet despite this awareness, their



accounts revealed that this tension between what they saw within media and the reality of their lived experience caused distress.

One of the women repeatedly stressed how her singledom gave her the freedom to spend long periods of time abroad, while several mentioned the benefits of not having to compromise or consider another when making decisions. However, only one interviewee explicitly associated independence with cultivating an emotional detachment from her ex-partner, as seen in *HTBS*. Mandy is a 25-year-old lesbian who has just moved to London from Central America. Mandy describes herself as having spent almost none of her adult life single, previously having had a five-year relationship, with a year of casual dating in-between. She split up with her ex-girlfriend four weeks ago when she moved to London and expresses a strong desire to emotionally detach from her ex, despite a feeling of loneliness:

Mandy: 'I used to rely on my partner a lot for emotional support ... she was the first person I would call ... she was like look, I cannot handle your stuff so... That ... pushed me into being like, ok I have to deal with my stuff alone ..., or to actively seek help ... from family members or from like friends ... not ... using my relationship as a like as a crutch to walk through life.'

Here, and throughout her interview, Mandy *tries* to construct herself as an independent, emotionally detached subject who deals with 'stuff alone', characteristics which she deems highly desirable, taking up themes from the cultural representations. But in doing so she betrays a sense of sadness, and disappointment in herself that achieving the fantasy of emotional detachment is not easy. She describes maintaining a close relationship with her ex negatively as a 'crutch', a metaphor that aligns herself with tropes of disability, and shows how deeply this penetrates her psyche. Mandy does say more positively that her independence allows her to connect with others, while continuing to assert her self-reliance and does not hold them in opposition. Thus, unlike Alice in *How To Be Single* who rarely turns to others (See Chapter 5.2.3), and unproblematically transforms into an independent subject alone, for Mandy this is a far more complex process which demonstrates how fraught negotiating this fantasy of 'independence' is.

But while many of the women valued maintaining social connections, this was rarely emphasised as more important to them than independence. If anything, social connection was articulated *through* the theme of independence. This was neatly summed up by one interviewee when describing why her parents did not worry about her single status. Anna is a 36-year-old woman who identifies as queer. Originally from the north of England, she has lived in London for 12 years. She has been single for most of her life, with one serious relationship ending when she was 20, and a few casual sexual relationships since then. Anna constructs her single self as successful *because* of her parents' perception that she is able to be both independent *and* not socially isolated, still drawing upon on a range of people for support.

This stands in contrast to the majority of the media representations, which *only* celebrated independence. Like several of the interviewees Anna shows a complex understanding of what successful single femininity means to her, one which includes connection, while still being framed primarily within the terms of independence. For example, Anna says her parents do not need to be ‘concerned’ for her welfare – explicitly because of the balance she maintains between independence and social connection. Interestingly she uses this balance to assert her independence from her parents.

One of the older interviewees challenges the binary of connection and isolation further, presenting a more ambivalent stance than the younger women. Caroline is a 50-year-old black, middle class, heterosexual woman, who has always lived in London and has been single most of her life. Her last relationship ended three years ago. She shifts between states of *both* connection and solitude, simultaneously describing herself as both a loner and as enthusiastically attending monthly parties with a singles group. Caroline tells me she has enjoyed the support of friends who visited during a recent period of illness, but she is also at times a ‘real homebody’. This is typical of the older interviewees, who challenged the binary opposition of independence and dependence. Indeed scholars have highlighted how the independent subject is a myth; possible only because of the care and support by others, and the interconnections between the two (Chatzidakis, et al., 2020; Sennett, 2002; West, 2002, p. 88). Thus, the older women I spoke with often remained ambivalent towards the suggestion that independence requires isolation and wished to also retain a social connection. They were caught between, and simultaneously regulated by, these two opposing discourses. As Berlant argues, the women demonstrate a continued optimism towards the fantasy of the independent single women, not relinquishing, while still remaining critical of such a ‘promise’ (Berlant, 2008).

Yet the younger interviewees’ accounts indicated more worry about the threatening consequences of being outside the regulatory framing of femininity as coupled (Berlant, 2008). As a result, they often reattached to norms of coupledness and fantasies of romantic discourse. This is represented by Annette who, like several younger interviewees, constructed freedom and independence as important to her<sup>30</sup>. Annette is a white, 30-year-old heterosexual woman who has been single for one year. Her last relationship lasted four years, and she has had a couple of one- and two-year relationships before that. Annette notes that while the day-to-day realities of life during the past year of being single remain much the same, she enjoys the *fantasy* of independence:

‘Being single hasn’t changed everything that I’m doing erm but it’s but ... yes, because I’m aware of the freedom, I’m feeling like I’m carrying that freedom now as a coat or something ...’

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<sup>30</sup> For example Gemma, Daniella, Theresa, Margaret, Laura and Abby all said having time to themselves was something that they prized about being single.

By drawing upon the powerful metaphor of a coat, Annette constructs her freedom as being a protective force, one which she takes with her, but, significantly, can be removed when desired. Annette goes on to underline the importance of independence when she explains that she has never wanted to get married and doesn't believe in the romantic fantasy that one person can fulfil or complete you. Yet, she enthusiastically takes up romance narratives when discussing dating. She says she is 'a romantic at heart' and she would like it to be through 'happenstance' that she meets someone, and not through a dating app:

'It just feels very unromantic ... I want to be swept off my feet, and that's not going to happen by somebody sending you an instant message that they've copy-pasted 50 times....'

Annette states her disappointment at using technology to mediate her relationships. She rejects discourses that urge single women to abandon notions of meeting a partner by chance to take an emotionally detached, 'realistic' approach of dating apps. She cannot relinquish the promise of a spontaneous romantic encounter, or romantic-comedy style 'meet cute', and presents an account which both celebrates independence, denies disappointment over being single, but *also* maintains a proximity to fantasies of normative coupledness, which leave her conflicted. As Illouz notes, discourses of romance are not eclipsed by such technology and rationalisation, but compete with them, a battle which Annette struggles to reconcile (Illouz, 2012). Annette refuses to adopt what Susanne Leonard describes as a neoliberalised entrepreneurial approach to her love life where online daters employ a 'market-based' rationalised logic in the search for a partner (Leonard, 2019, pp. 38–39). Consequently, she expresses frustration that her desire for the romantic ideal stops her from reaching her goal of a relationship, a goal which she still holds on to. Indeed, several women described their pleasurable attachment to romantic fantasies<sup>31</sup>.

While Annette maintains proximity to the romantic discourses which produce her disappointment, suggesting a relationship of cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011), these filmic fantasies were challenged by some. Jennifer is good example of this. A 33-year-old, white, middle class, heterosexual woman, who has had one relationship, lasting a couple of months in her mid-20s, Jennifer tells me she has never sought out coupledness:

'I think it sounds like a terrible idea! ... You have to make all these concessions for people and you have to not be selfish.'

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<sup>31</sup> Katherine, Joan and Jane also regularly enjoyed watching romantic comedies.

Here, Jennifer draws on individualising discourses of freedom and autonomy to reject the coupled norm. In contrast to Annette, she then viscerally describes why she actively *resists* watching romantic comedies because of the anger and hurt that fantasies of romance provoke in her:

‘I got really cross with like erm films. One year my New Year’s resolutions was to not watch any rom coms because I was like they’re just bollocks! It’s just shit ... that’s not how life is, so why do we have to have that all portrayed to us when that’s just so far from reality? ... it just makes me really angry cause I’m like, well that doesn’t happen, so stop portraying these stupid films as if that’s what life is like! ....., it’s just sort of hurtful almost... it’s just silly.’

Similarly to Annette, rather than critiquing films simply for portraying normative romantic coupledness, Jennifer critiques them for not being ‘realistic’. That is, she dislikes them for not portraying things as (she perceives) they *are*, rather than for misrepresenting how things *ought* to be<sup>32</sup>. Jennifer angrily employs this justification as a way of coping with and protecting herself from the pain and hurt this disjuncture causes her. Yet despite this, Jennifer goes on to re-embrace such romance narratives, expressing her deep sadness about one film’s ending where the couple splits up:

Jennifer: *Oh my god!* ... The complete opposite of a rom com ending... But I was absolutely gutted at the end. ... we were like at the end we were like oh my god, how, how can they end it like that?

Interviewer: So I guess part of you still likes that ending?

Jennifer: Yeah, I know, yeah, yeah!

This is significant as it demonstrates Jennifer’s deep, continued attachment to and desire for those ‘unrealistic’ romance narratives notwithstanding the fact that they also hurt and anger her. Berlant argues that genres regulate affective expectations in ways that allow the viewer to manage their ambivalences towards such narratives, without going so far as *transgressing* them (Berlant, 2008, p. 4). The function of genre therefore helps the viewer to manage or contain the gap between such ‘unrealistic’ fantasies and the reality of lived experience. Thus, when Jennifer watches the radical transgression of genre convention – where the couple split up – she experiences an upsetting break in her management of the gap between fantasy and her reality and the ability to manage her ambivalence fails. She is met with the reality that coupling does not always occur. Jennifer’s pleasure in watching the film is based on the promise of having the romance narrative fulfilled. Even though they produce a feeling of *overall* disappointment, Jennifer remains ‘enchanted by’, romance narratives, while simultaneously continuing to assert her independence (Berlant, 2008, p. 2).

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<sup>32</sup> Maria, Katherine, Mandy, Theresa, Daniella, Joan and Laura also dismissed romance narratives in romantic comedies as ‘unrealistic’.

Consistent across Annette and Jennifer's accounts is a recognition that while the single women continued to see themselves as independent subjects and enjoy the freedom and connection that singledom offered them, they also demonstrated an attachment to fantasised cultural ideals of romantic coupledness. While Annette acknowledges that such an ideal is culturally located and 'unrealistic', she maintains a hope that this can be achieved, which creates a contradictory, concerning and unsettling psychic tension.

### 5.3.2 Economic freedoms: desires and disappointments

While the interviewees expressed contradictory accounts of how they understood independence in relation to emotional detachment, most women cited economic freedoms of singledom in less problematic terms. Although several women were temporarily not looking for a partner because they were prioritising looking for a job, they did not present their career as being incompatible with coupledness. One exception came from the youngest participant, 22-year-old, Sonya, a South East Asian woman who has never had a relationship<sup>33</sup>. She was about to start her first job and drew on her career to justify her single status: 'I think one of the reasons more why my online dating hasn't been successful is because I'm in between trying to get a job ... people always think 'oh she's a bit of a liability''. Consistent with Lahad's notion of singledom as produced through temporal logics, where establishing a career comes first, Sonya says she is now ready for a relationship *because* she has the stability of a job, placing her career something to be secured *before* coupledness (Lahad, 2017, p. 32).

Yet while most of the interviewees did not present their career as incompatible with a relationship, several interviewees made direct references to media texts and the fantasy of the independent single career woman, to make sense of their own lives and articulate their own desires. For example, Jennifer unprompted brings up the 'independent' character of Saga in *The Bridge* (See Chapter 5.2.2 above) who rejects the pressure on women to demonstrate a polite, 'pleasing femininity', and perhaps by extension, to conform to the coupled norm (McRobbie, 2015):

Jennifer: I liked her character. I'm not sure that I'd like to draw a parallel [laughs] but no, she was super independent.

Interviewer: Is that a kind of aspect of her that you like?

Jennifer: Definitely like, we'd all quite like to be a bit more autistic sometimes, and just say exactly what we think ... but you can't because it's [not] polite...

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<sup>33</sup> Jane also says that prioritised her career over her relationships when she was in her twenties.

While Jennifer distances herself from identifying directly with the pathologised identity of ASD, it is something she finds appealing as a way to realise the fantasy of independence and reject or release herself from the regulatory gendered norms of social behaviour – what Berlant describes as emotional labour (Berlant, 2008). Originally coined by Hochschild in relationship to the workplace, Berlant argues that in popular cultural texts, emotional labour, where women are expected to show and teach other the correct management of emotions, is central to femininity (Berlant, 2008, p. 170). Jennifer's comment that we would all like to be more autistic reveals the significant pressure she feels to conform, and a perception that her *own* emotional life is burdened by this, restricting her desire to be independent.

### *Freedom and consumption*

Several of the middle-class women reinforced the link between freedom and consumption as empowering, and were incited by discourses to 'treat' the single self. Theresa, a white 50-year-old heterosexual middle-class woman who was brought up in Ireland and has lived in London for three years, describes herself as single 'mostly all of the time', having had one 5-month relationship around 15 years ago. Her last relationship of 8 months ended 8 years ago. She describes how the fulfilment she garners from her profession as a nanny centres around the economic freedoms it gives her. Theresa told me her single lifestyle is *better* than her non-single friends due to her ability to jet off to luxury destinations on holiday, together with her lack of caring commitments:

Theresa: Most of my, my friends look at me and think 'Oh shit I would love your life'.

Interviewer: Do they bring it up? Do they talk about?

Theresa: Yeah yeah they go 'oh god ... your life' and most of the Mums when I go to the playground they go 'so what are you up to now?' I go 'Going to La Rochelle for a week' and they go 'God I love your life – going to Sri Lanka for three weeks.'

Thus, Theresa articulates the freedom to travel which her singledom offers her in economic and autonomous, agentic terms. Echoing the fantasy of the ideal individualised neoliberal single woman whose success as a single feminine subject is expressed through the 'freedom to consume' (Lazar, 2009), Theresa contrasts herself to mothers in the playground who are implied to be 'chained' physically and emotionally, while she 'hops' to exotic destinations of her choice. By emphasising her freedom to not be restricted like the mothers, Theresa conceals the injury of her failure to receive the recognition and belonging that a normatively coupled, reproductive feminine subject would. Consumption here is what Lauren Berlant calls 'its own reward' (Berlant, 2008, p. 20), that is where the act of consumption in itself offers her little more than the *promise* of recognition.

Several of the wealthier single woman engaged with the fantasy of economic freedom, saying the ability to live alone, spend their income on themselves, or redecorate their homes according to their tastes was

representative of the *pleasurable* freedoms they enjoy. But at the same time, the wealthier or middle-income women rejected mediated narratives related to consumption and the body. Thus, while constructing themselves as consuming subjects, interviewees contradictorily said they feel deeply regulated by advertising and magazine discourses. They actively tried to avoid these messages – for example by not reading certain magazines. But they found tuning out such messages difficult, perhaps impossible and several said they are indirectly influenced by them. Hannah is a white, 39-year-old heterosexual, middle class woman who has lived in London for almost 20 years and works in the creative industries. Hannah says while disagreeing with adverts, she doesn't think it's possible to avoid the discourses they circulate, which are pervasive at the societal level:

'I really don't like advertising... a kind of idealized picture ... on like insurance or car adverts ... those kind of things don't really bother me, because I find them abhorrent and so it's not like 'oh they're making me feel shit that I'm not adhering to this way'.... but then I think it probably does overall have an effect on us as a society it must do, it must do.'

While Hannah says these images don't 'bother her', minimising her distress, she contradicts this neutrality by adding that she thinks they are abhorrent, suggesting a deep discomfort. She moves between a personalised rejection of them, 'I'm not adhering this way' to shifting to a collective focus of 'society' as a way of distancing herself from such personalised pain. She repeats the phrase 'it must do' underscoring her belief that this is affecting her but also indicating a fear that she might never fully know how much. While the regulatory pressure of embodiment discourses on women have been discussed by many scholars (Elias et al., 2017), there was a sense that there is specific, intensified pressure on single women:

Hannah: A friend ... she does a lot of this very negative discussion about herself err in relation to being single and not being attractive ... and being too old, she's also 39.... this pressure of all these kind of things about advertising and perfection .... I think, 'it's not about that'... If, if you're yeah if you're affected by that – ugh awful ...

While Hannah again distances herself from such discourses of embodiment, clarifying that *she* doesn't think this way, she notes that her friend is the same age, suggesting she is also subject to such temporal pressures. Hannah thus perceives a media- and consumption-related pressure and desire to attain a certain physical appearance as highly distressing. She suggests such gendered pressure is deepened by older singledom, which is linked to historical tropes of unattractiveness.

Importantly, interviewees who did not have a high income described the opposite relationship to discourses of freedom and consumption: rather than singledom offering them freedom to consume,

singledom exposed them to increased financial precarity. Jessica is a 39-year-old education professional who lives in a one-bedroom on the cheaper outskirts of London and describes the economic hardship she faces<sup>34</sup>. She told me that she aspires to getting a second bedroom in order to boost her household income, or to adopt a child, but says she cannot afford this. She feels that the economic hardships faced by single-person households are made invisible by advertising discourses:

‘Every, you know, advert on TV there’s always, everyone’s in a couple or ... What about the single person living in London who’s financially struggling or has one income and they’re living on beans and toast you know so that you can go out on the weekend? ...I really, really can’t bear...’

Jessica illuminates how her lifestyle falls outside the normative institutions of intimate life reproduced within advertising, and the pain and anger this obscuration produces. While her anger shows defiance towards such discourses, her account is laced with deep frustration and sadness arising from this class-based exclusion and isolation. Rather than singledom producing an idealised form of independence, Jessica is caught within a financial system designed around coupledness which fails to offer support for single people and instead renders her more financially vulnerable. This is exacerbated in the context of a declining welfare state and lack of social security (See Chapter 8.1). The adverts not only highlight the gap between such a fantasy and the economic hardship of her lived experience they also produce a sense of stigma that she cannot fully articulate, as shown by her incomplete sentence. Thus, while the lower-income women talked of the deep pain caused by such exclusions, the middle-class subjects more ambivalently engaged with media narratives of consumption. They embraced the fantasy of freedom through consumption as a practice, but they resisted *mediated* discourses of consumption in relation to embodiment. They retained an attachment to such media fantasies, despite the fact that they produced within them a deep sense of disappointment and discomfort (Berlant, 2008, p. 2).

### **5.3.3 Limits of freedom: younger fears, older ambivalences**

While celebrating freedom as one of the most valued aspects of their single status, many interviewees expressed concern and fears around becoming socially isolated in the future. In doing so they drew implicitly on tropes of the older single woman. How this was expressed, varied according to age – younger interviewees, including those on the cusp of middle age, expressed fear that if they remained single for *too* long, they would become socially isolated or ‘stalled’ in their development<sup>35</sup>. Sam, 36, is an example of this. Sam is a white, middle-class, heterosexual woman who has lived in London for 11 years. She has spent around half of her adult life single, but in the past seven years has had two significant

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<sup>34</sup> Margaret also risked losing her home due to financial precarity.

<sup>35</sup> Daniella was anxious about transitioning to being coupled at the ‘right’ age.



relationships. The last one, which lasted three years and was serious, ended traumatically nine months ago. She reflects on her future:

‘It’s probably one of my biggest fears...I don’t want to be that 45-year-old single woman... Erm so there’s so much of that constructed idea of that person. Erm that scares me a lot ... being lonely.’

While Sam tries to account for the fantasy of the ‘old maid’ as being simply socially constructed, she evokes palpable fears over becoming one herself; her possible *future* loneliness and sadness demonstrating the acute regulatory distress that such discourses produce in her. She alludes to historical tropes that pathologise the unattractive, lonely, old single maid (Lahad & Hazan, 2014; Lai, e al, 2015; O’Brian, 1973), an objectifying theme which will be further explored in Chapter 7. Yet Sam in a surprised tone told me of the sociability of her older single friends, suggesting such fears to be unfounded within lived experience:

‘What I have learnt actually from other people is that women in their 40s and 50s who are single ... when ... I started spending more time with single women my age ... they are so much fun.’

While she uses this example as a way of distancing herself from, or reducing, such a threatening fantasy she nevertheless demonstrates the power of such a trope, and the visceral pain that the potential threat of existing out-with ‘the frames of normative intimate life’ that the aging single woman represents to her (Berlant, 2008, p. 27). Several interviewees brought up the mediated figure of Bridget Jones, often framing her as an ageing isolated character they wanted to disidentify with<sup>36</sup>. For example, Mandy, 25, one of the younger interviewees, mentions how the character holds deep resonance for her, despite the fact the first novel was published in 1995, around the time of her birth:

‘I think the classic single woman ... that comes to mind, and it’s terrible that it does... is Bridget Jones the prototype of singlehood like being alone, sad, depressing, nobody loves you ... It’s hard not to internalise it... being single has always been portrayed in media as something that’s not desirable ... Especially the older you get. I’m very conscious of it but like at the same time I internalise it inevitably ..., so I try ... to like shift my thought away from it but...’

Here Mandy describes how she tries to distance herself from ‘internalising’ the ‘terrible’, threatening fantasies that Bridget Jones represents – an undesirable form of older, socially isolated, lonely single femininity – yet she also suggests she it is not fully possible to do so, and this creates a palpable sense of

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<sup>36</sup> Helen and Maria also mentioned Bridget Jones.

discontent. Rather than trying to challenge it, the abject fantasy of the lonely single woman is disturbing to her and she tries, but fails, to avoid it.

Older interviewees shared a different understanding of aging and 'isolation'. Margaret is a 66-year-old woman who has lived in London for 30 years, having moved from the US. She has been single for 25 years, after a 15-year relationship which was marked by domestic abuse. Such a painful legacy has led Margaret to renounce romantic relationships and she now self-defines as asexual. When I asked her to describe herself, the first thing she told me of was her long-held independence and isolation, describing how her mother raised her to be 'extremely independent' and take care of herself. Despite depicting her single life in largely negative terms as a defence against abusive relationships – both familial and romantic – Margaret frames the *positive* aspects of her singledom through the freedom, emotional detachment and social isolation that it offers her:

'I have my own interests and I'm not interested in compromising ...Freedom. Independence. I can do what I want. I'm not beholden to anybody... I don't have to think about another human being's needs, wants or issues... I prefer my own company, you know.'

Thus Margaret, while perhaps embodying the tropes of the older single woman as socially isolated, truly celebrates this 'independence'. When I asked her to envision her future, she did not desire closer social connection, instead she described how, while she anticipates financial precarity and deeply classed exclusions if she stays in London, she plans to sell her flat and retreat to a part of the Indian subcontinent to teach English. Margaret's fantasy of escape challenges the stigma of older single femininity and instead takes advantage of her ability to move and lack of ties. It also rejects conventional fantasies of femininity constructed around romance narratives and reproduction. Indeed several of the older women appropriated discourses of independence in more ambivalent and at times liberatory ways, adapting them to create alternative fantasies of love and belonging which work to position them as subjects worthy of affective recognition and importance (Berlant, 2008). Being outside the age of reproduction and no longer able to fulfil such a norm, freedom took a different meaning and was not a momentary stage on the path to coupledness.

#### **5.3.4 Subversive freedoms? Absences and improvisations**

Many of the women told me they saw a shift towards diverse and alternative portrayals of femininity in the media, including more representations of singledom. Yet when asked to identify examples, the majority could not think of any and the question was often met with prolonged silence. Within such absences, they still searched for validation, at times constructing their *own* alternative fantasies of intimate life which transcended the coupled norm *through* discourses of independence. Lauren Berlant argues that: 'if she cannot achieve the condition of generality through the standard marital and

reproductive modes of building reciprocity with the world, or “having a life” that adds up to something, she does it through gestures, episodes and other forms of fantasy improvisation; perhaps with less conventional objects, so long as she can feel in a general sense that she has known the feeling of love and carries the memory of having been affectively recognised,’ (Berlant, 2008, p. 7). Indeed, the interview accounts offered a space for the women to improvise alternative fantasies using mediated figures. For example, Helen told me that the highly mediated celebrity figure of Beyoncé embodies a desirable ‘single’ identity, despite her marital status, *because of* her autonomy and independence. Helen is a 41-year-old, white, heterosexual woman who has had several relationships of around two years, with her last relationship of eight months ending two years ago. Helen constructs her fantasised ideal of a ‘single’ woman through Beyoncé:

Helen: I keep thinking Beyoncé, Beyoncé, but you know she’s married and and, but she has that, you know her life comes first, I guess... which is, which is really... interesting to watch ... and that’s yeah intriguing to see that she’s out there as a woman... she comes across like a single woman almost in that she’s so, I don’t know, of her own, she comes first.

Interviewer: She’s not someone’s other half?

Helen: She’s 80% right?

Helen describes Beyoncé as ‘single’ *because of* her ability to always ‘come first’ and to stand apart from her partner, seemingly alone. Thus, values of freedom and independence and being ‘out there’, work as a fantasy that for her transcends the gendered and coupled norms of Beyoncé’s marital status and obscures her significant economic privileges. Helen describes Beyoncé, as rather than *subsumed* by her identity as a wife, (as someone’s ‘other half’) as being 80% ‘herself’. Helen marks her out as exceptional, saying it is this intriguing, desirable quality which draws her to Helen’s attention, highlighting that such independence challenges normative femininity.

The women often appropriated elements of existing media constructions of single femininity – such as, for example *Frances Ha* and or Saga in *The Bridge* (see Chapter 5.2.2) – but crucially transformed these constructions. Several interviewees discussed the freedom to form extremely close, emotionally fulfilling non-sexual relationships, which, while largely absent from media representations, could be found in some media examples, such as, *Frances Ha*<sup>37</sup>. However, unlike in *Frances Ha*, in their lived realities, such relationships often still held a proximity to the coupled norm. Katherine is a white, middle class, heterosexual woman who has lived in London for 11 years and has been single for 10 years. She describes how she had an affair with a man for several years in her twenties but did not see this as altering her single status, and for the past six years has not dated anyone. Now aged 33, Katherine uses

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<sup>37</sup> Katherine, Jennifer, Laura, Anna and Caroline all mentioned the deep friendships they had.

the term ‘surrogate boyfriend’ to describe the close relationship she has with her best-friend, who is her emotional support and who she talks to about ‘everything’, drawing on the normative terminology of heteronormative coupledness to *replace* that of friendship. Caroline meanwhile describes with great warmth the deep healing power that an emotionally close friendship has given her, allowing her to trust another, but resists their coupling:

‘I had a very good friend called Peter and we were... not sexual but we were very emotionally close and ... I learnt how to trust and to rely on another human being... We sort of come to an end because we were so close that I felt that, neither of us felt that, there was any room for anything else.’

Caroline has surrendered this important relationship in order to ‘make room’ for the promise of *future* coupledness and fantasies of romantic love. Thus, the diversity of relationships expressed by my interviewees was still restricted within certain conditions of possibility, forced to either conform to, or be sacrificed for, the romantic coupled norm. These accounts reveal the significant effort the women I spoke to performed to maintain proximity to conventional romance narratives, which offered them a sense of belonging and affective recognition, yet limited their flourishing (Berlant, 2008).

It was non-heterosexual, non-monogamous femininities which were found to draw on discourses of freedom to construct even more radical visions of alternative relationship formations and actively *celebrate* a decentering of the romantic coupled norm (Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004). Laura is a 24-year-old, bisexual, non-monogamous, white woman who has been in London for a few months and single for a year, following a six-month relationship. Laura radically transforms the coupled norm and recentres non-romantic love within her intimate life when she discusses her ‘friend’:

‘I want [Rachel] to be in my life forever in a way that’s more than what I feel for other friends... And it’s something that... if I start dating someone, I will tell them that I have this really intense relationship with her... I think it is a sort of a partnership erm but not necessarily a romantic relationship it’s like a maybe like a platonic partnership ...’

While Laura similarly describes her relationship with Rachel as somewhere *between* friendship and a romantic partnership, blurring the single/coupled binary unlike Katherine and Caroline, she does not see this platonic relationship as replicating or compromising a romantic one, and instead finds room for it *above* other aspects of her life. She subverts the hierarchy of romantic heterosexual relationships over friendship, and coupledness over singledness, to trouble normative structures of care, which as Roseneil and Budgeon have argued are being transformed within late modernity (Budgeon, 2006; Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004). She then takes up the fantasy depicted by Frances and Sophie:

‘I think about [the future] now I kind of see myself near Rachel, erm ... have like that kind of emotional support and stability erm and we’ve also talked about that a lot, .... potentially there’s room for a partner but actually if I think about it, I think more about it career-wise and myself-wise then I think about whether there’s space for another.’

When fantasising about her future, Laura subverts and challenges normative hierarchical constructions of what constitutes a ‘happy’ intimate life by aligning herself towards Rachel, then her career, herself, and lastly any romantic partner who is at the bottom of the hierarchy and can be included *if* there ‘is space’. She locates and orientates her happiness towards a relationship which defies any normative form of categorisation and which is elevated as a priority. As with Frances and Sophies’ vision of the ‘good life’ in *Frances Ha*, however, she does maintain proximity to the coupled norm in her centring of another form of coupledness, non-romantic as it is, rather than a more radical centring of a multitude of non-coupled relationships (Budgeon, 2006).

#### **5.4 Conclusion: regulatory *and* transformative freedoms**

Based on my analysis of contemporary media representations, it is evident that the successful single subject is constructed through fantasies of freedom, independence, and autonomy. These ‘freedoms’ not only draw upon and sustain postfeminist, neoliberal discourses of femininity, they continue to present those singles who do not rapidly achieve emotional detachment and independence as being dysfunctional and immature, as failing to ‘correctly’ progress into coupledness according to strict temporal rules. Yet within media representations, and even more so in the interviewees’ accounts, there is also a profoundly liberatory understanding of freedom, which worked to challenge patriarchal, gendered hierarchies of intimate life and feminine subjectivity.

The single women I spoke to echoed discourses of independence, self-reliance and freedom that I identified within the media representations. As in the media accounts, they celebrated independence as a valued aspect of their single femininity. Yet despite embracing such fantasies, their accounts also revealed the deep tensions, ambivalences and contradictions that such discourses provoked in them. Within the representations, independence was depicted as a state that must be achieved autonomously, through emotional detachment, within strict temporal limits. However, while this was aspired to, the single women I spoke to revealed more ambivalently the disappointment and difficulty of not being able to achieve this in their own lives. While many aspired to becoming emotionally independent and self-reliant, they also desired social connection, troubling such a binary. Where social connection *was* desired, it was often articulated through the discourse of independence, demonstrating the deep resonance this discourse had. Accounts of independence often coexisted alongside a desire for future romantic connection, sustaining the coupled norm. Following Berlant, the women were caught between

retaining a fidelity to the very fantasy of independence which was producing their disappointment and restriction, while still being critical of it (Berlant, 2008)

Media discourses predominantly celebrated the independence of the single woman through fantasies of ‘empowering’ economic freedom, specifically professionalism and consumption. Yet there was a sharp class divide in how these discourses were negotiated by those I interviewed. Several of the middle-class professionals cited depictions of the single career woman as allowing them to make sense of their lives, and as providing a rare chance for recognition and belonging within media representations. And while the freedom to consume as they pleased and cultivate a single ‘lifestyle’ was emphasised by several of the older, wealthier, middle-class interviewees as a pleasurable aspect of their freedom, less well-off singles articulated the significant pain the stark disconnect between such classed fantasies and the precarious reality of living on a single-income in London, caused them.

Yet while the middle-class women I spoke to celebrated the freedom to engage in consumption *practices*, they rejected discourses of consumption presented by the *media*. Rather than empowered, the women felt deeply regulated by discourses of consumption related to appearance and the body, specifically those in advertising, which required the cultivation of a particular form of single female embodiment. While they sought to avoid such media, they told of the impossibility of this and the pain it caused. Their accounts also betrayed a continued pleasurable attachment to the romantic fantasies of normative coupled femininity, even while rejecting them. This reveals not only the pervasiveness of these discourses but also the *exhaustion* that this continual process of resistance and reattachment produced in them (Berlant, 2011).

There were also significant temporal limits to freedom, with the older single woman largely absent from the media representations which celebrated independence. Not only that, younger singles were required to be only *temporarily* independent, a stage to be achieved towards maturity and coupledness. The younger singles I interviewed expressed significant anxiety over being able to meet these temporal markers, viscerally haunted by the threat of failing to do so. Within the interview accounts, it was older single women who constructed more radical, lasting fantasies of freedom which rejected conventional reproductive, coupled femininity and who established alternative forms of affective recognition and social belonging out-with dominant cultural discourses.

Amidst the deeply regulatory constructions of ‘freedom’ depicted in the media texts, there was also evidence of more transformative freedoms which worked to decouple the fantasy of the good life from romantic love and coupledness, deprivilege sexual relationships, and instead centre platonic friendship. Such transformations were more often articulated within the interviewee accounts, where the single women discussed the deep emotional fulfilment of friendships, as in *Frances Ha*. Yet they often remained

ambivalently attached to the promise of future coupledness which served to limit their flourishing, but offered them a necessary sense of social belonging. A more radical freedom however was expressed by women who practiced non-heterosexual, non-monogamous relationship formations. These women drew upon the 'freedom' of existing outside the coupled norm, to decentre romantic love, subvert conventional hierarchies of care and trouble the single/coupled binary.

Paradoxically, the 'freedom' of the successful single subject is a construction which is only achieved through an intensive process of self-surveillance, regulation and self-transformation. I move on to discuss how these self-regulatory processes operate in the next empirical chapter, Chapter 6.

## Chapter 6. The self-surveilling subject: finding, regulating and transforming the single ‘self’

### 6.1 Introduction

In Chapter 5, I discussed how fantasies of the ‘free’, independent single female subject are constructed according to highly regulatory, temporally mediated discourses which paradoxically circumscribe such ‘freedoms’. This chapter follows by examining how single femininity is actively produced as a ‘technology of the self’ (Foucault, 1982) through an intensive regime of self-surveillance, regulation and transformation. I argue that self-surveillance coalesces around discourses of the single ‘self’ as a free, independent and autonomous subject. It is thus through a regulatory process of self-surveillance that the subject must construct, maintain and transform herself into an independent, self-knowing subject. I will show how the women I interviewed construct their single subjectivity through three central self-surveilling processes: self-identification, self-regulation, and self-transformation.

I argue that singledom is constructed as a self-empowering process through which the feminine subject is required and incited to engage in active self-discovery through which she continually *identifies* her ‘authentic’ single self (Banet-Weiser, 2012). While this theme has been identified within the media texts *and* the interview narratives, the interview narratives reveal that the process of identifying a fantasised authentic, unified and ‘empowered’ single self produces significant psychic tensions and conflicts.

The single subject is an intensely *self-regulating* one, produced through continual self-monitoring, both by the single women themselves and by those around them. Within the media texts, I show how the single woman is compelled to present the ‘correct’ single self. She must protect and maintain this self through affective, behavioural and embodied self-regulation, particularly through discourses of consumption and sexuality. The single subject is also required to regulate her embodiment to ensure that she is heteronormatively sexually attractive but not *too* sexualised. Self-regulation is often *affective*, with the single woman required to present a bold, confident, happy, emotionally-detached, femininity, which repudiates pain and negativity (Dobson, 2014; Gill & Orgad, 2015). Following postfeminist logics, through processes of self-silencing, she conforms to and does not challenge broader patriarchal structures within which she is located (McRobbie, 2015). In the interviews however, I show how many of the single women I spoke to felt distressed and bound by the compulsion to regulate their bodies and sexuality, even while remaining psychically invested in such fantasies. Women connected their dissatisfaction with their embodiment with the pressure to cultivate an upbeat disposition.

Finally, I demonstrate how representations of single women depict the single subject as having to *transform* herself into the fantasy of a self-empowered, independent, heteronormatively attractive,



emotionally regulating subject. She must do so according to temporal rules which ensure that she transforms without delay, completing her self-transformation quickly within a strict timeframe, and that her actions produce ‘successful’ returns of coupledness, in the (near) future. Several of the single women I spoke to took up these temporal discourses in conflicting ways, revealing anxieties over conforming to or missing out on temporal markers. While many of the middle-class interviewees worked to transform their affective state in ways which sustained and reinscribed the coupled norm, there was evidence of the troubling of these norms.

## **6.2 Media representations**

### **6.2.1 Finding the self: self-knowledge and the ‘authentic’ self**

The media representations I analysed construct the single woman as compelled to identify and maintain her single self through intensive self-surveillance. In line with the ‘authentic’ as central within postfeminist society in the construction of subjectivity discovering her ‘real self’ and being ‘true’ to oneself becomes a fundamental attribute of the fantasy of ‘empowered’ single female subjectivity (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 10). As I will show in my analysis, singledom is presented as a self-reflexive state through which the self must be discovered and maintained, and marks an intensification of the relations to self in which one is called on to take the self as an object of knowledge (Foucault, 1988). I start with the special edition of US *Elle* magazine dedicated to the single woman; a genre characterised by its confluence with regulatory self-help discourses (Favaro, 2017) (See Chapter 4.2.1). One article titled ‘10 women on being relentlessly single-shamed by parents’, sees Ana, a 22-year-old South-East Asian woman, from Washington D.C., constructing singledom as a period which has allowed her time to identify her ‘single self’:

‘The second I let someone else in, I lose control over my happiness...All I know is it took a long time to feel the way I do about myself now; I’m not going to let someone else change that.’

Ana is protective of the fantasised happy single self she has worked hard to cultivate while single and wants to actively maintain this. She also presents this self as a particular affective state – ‘a feeling’ which is potentially threatened by coupledness. This intense individualisation of the ‘self,’ achieved through affective self-regulation suggests that feminine subjectivity must be carefully, continually protected if, or when, the subject then moves into a coupled state.

This is demonstrated in a more overt way in one of the closing scenes of *How To be Single (HTBS)* (See Chapter 4.2.2). Alice bumps into her ex-boyfriend Josh at a party and during their emotional reunion, she tells him: ‘I’m so obsessed with the idea of being in love, that I just, it’s like... I completely lose myself. Like, I forget what I want, and I just disappear.’ Here coupledness is conceived of as threatening Alice’s *entire* self, as causing her to completely ‘disappear’ as a subject. Alice instead vows to affectively regulate

against becoming emotionally invested in romance narratives. Thus, the feminine self is constructed here as incompatible with coupledness, something which cannot exist *within* partnership, reinforcing the binary between an independent selfhood and heteronormative coupledness.

Another *Elle* article features an interview with the writer-producer of *HTBS*, Dana Fox, who takes this binary further, imposing temporal restrictions. Rather than being threatened by singledom, Fox argues it is only *once* the single woman has identified and displayed her 'authentic' self that she is able to become coupled. The single subject must continually self-survey to ensure that the 'correct' version of her 'self' is presented at the right time. In the article, Fox constructs herself as a successful 'self-knowing' subject. She describes how once she discovered her 'real self' and presented this 'authentic' version, rather than her '*wrong*' self she was able to couple. She instructs the reader:

'If you're attracting people to you with the wrong version of yourself .... then it's never gonna work... So it's like, let your freak flag fly, and find someone who thinks your freak flag is adorable.'

Fox extorts women to confidently let their 'real self' – or 'freak flag' – show, suggesting that revealing the 'authentic' self may not be comfortable, but must be confidently displayed nevertheless, in an 'empowering' move (Gill & Orgad, 2015). Displaying the self is central to cultivating successful single femininity, but only in preparation for coupledness. Single women are not only required to show their 'correct' authentic self but to refrain from revealing too much of their 'true' self at the wrong *moments*. Such self-regulation reconfigures self-help themes, identified by Taylor, which call on women to reveal their 'real' (or wrong) self *only* once coupledness has been secured (Taylor, 2012, p. 153). But, by contrast, in another article from the magazine, the fictional superhero turned detective, Jessica Jones, is praised for *not* showing her authentic self. Her careful emotional regulation and withdrawal is a source of self-empowerment:

'She [Jessica] starts to feel she's ... revealing too much of herself, a barrier goes up. She can't allow him to see in her... She... feels like she wants to remain in control, which is what I loved about that scene. It gave her power both physically and emotionally.'

So, while the single subject must cultivate, project and protect the fantasy of the individualised 'authentic' single self, as a process of self-empowerment and continual affective monitoring, she must concurrently display the 'correct' version of herself and at times hide herself according to carefully prescribed rules which reinforce heterosexual coupledness.

## **6.2.2 Regulating the self: the surveilled single woman**

### **6.2.2.2 Sexuality and embodiment**

In the media representations I examined, single women were constructed as required to intensively self-regulate – particularly their sexuality and embodiment. The postfeminist idea that sexuality can be empowering only if it is strictly self-regulated is manifest in *Chewing Gum* (Dobson, 2014). *Chewing Gum* is premised on the fact that Tracey is a virgin<sup>38</sup> which is maintained through self-regulation. The requirement to also be a sexually desiring subject is complicated through intersections with race: not only is Tracey a virgin, she is also black – a historically hypersexualised identity (West, 2008). In Episode 3, ‘I Just Need Some Company’ we see Tracey showing a strong desire, if not to engage in sex, to appear physically attractive. She is tricked by her friends into going to a sex club – it is only when she reaches the door that she realises what it is. But having passed the scrutiny of the admissions policy which requires all entrants to be ‘attractive’, she feels empowered. Tracey rejects either victimhood or sexual deviancy which may be attached to a black woman entering a sex club (West, 2008) and rejoices in her attractiveness:

Tracey: ‘Did you hear that Candice? Whoops! I thought Trace wasn’t on trend? Turns out I got into porno palace cause of all of dis [points to her face]. Yes, Yes. Rita Ora better catch the next train to Germany cause the Whoopi Goldberg Train is....’

Interestingly she dismisses Rita Ora<sup>39</sup>, a youthful, glamorous pop singer who appropriates black beauty norms and wears sexualised clothing, and instead constructs Whoopi Goldberg, a 65-year-old actor and comedian, who displays a non-sexualised, unfeminine stylisation as *more* desirable. In doing so, she celebrates a less sexualised form of embodiment. But once in the club, Tracey is caught in the conflicting ‘push and pull’ that Dobson argues young women must negotiate: being required to appear sexy, but not *overly* sexualized (Dobson, 2014, p. 101). She dances alone awkwardly and unhappily while she longingly waits for a man to approach her, dressed in a sporty full-body swimsuit, in contrast to the other women who are in bikinis. Tracey then spots a sign on the wall saying men are not allowed to approach women in the club. Once she realizes that she is not being avoided because she is unattractive and she can potentially engage in sex, she feels empowered. She announces straight to the camera, and the audience, from a side position:

Tracey: Haa... I am worthy! It’s just rules. I can have sex with anyone. I could have sex with everyone. I’ve just got to ask. This is great. This is...

But halfway through she stops, her face falls, and turns to speak to the camera directly, now talking to herself:

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<sup>38</sup> Until the final episode of Series 2.

<sup>39</sup> While Rita Ora is of Albanian ethnicity, she controversially uses black beauty techniques such as box-braiding and hair slicking to create a black beauty aesthetic.

Tracey: No it's not. Nooo, no, no wake up. What are you talking about. What are you doing? This is gross. This is disgusting, I'd be a prostitute doing charity work. I've got to put a stop to this.

The soliloquy highlights Tracey's sudden shift in thinking, emphasises her point of view, and engagingly grabs the viewers' sympathy (Jewitt & Leeuwen, 2001, p. 135). However, the second shot is less close up than the side shot, and shows a couple behind her engaging in a sex act. The camera angle underscores the intensive self-regulation Tracey is performing to present herself as a sexually attractive single feminine subject but also to resist engaging in the sex acts depicted behind her, which might label her 'sluttish' or 'too sexy' (Dobson, 2014). The episode closes with a rallying speech from Tracey to the other members of the club. She shouts and gestures, saying:

Tracey: Yeah. We'll just all have some sex yes? Fucking joke. Stop! I'm Tracey. And I ain't having sex with anyone here! Because for the first time in my life all I got to do is aim and click a finger and I could have anyone I want to... Look, you're beautiful people. Ok, I might want to bang some of ya. I just want to know who I'm banging, do you know what I mean? Sometimes I feel ugly. Who feels ugly too? Yes! Thank you, yes.

Here Tracey publicly constructs herself as a self-regulating *and* a sexually desiring subject. She evokes a collective identity when she asks if everyone there feels the same anxiety over being sexually attractive, demonstrating a blurring of the individualisation of sexuality and self-transformation. She also manages to challenge the impossible requirement placed on working class women to deny recognition of their sexuality in order to ensure 'respectability' (Skeggs, 1997).

Tracey then speaks to the camera in a final soliloquy, with a shot so close up her face fills the screen, creating intimacy with the viewer who is forced to pay close attention (Jewitt & Leeuwen, 2001, p. 135; Lauzen & Deiss, 2009, p. 380). Indeed, *Chewing Gum* frequently breaks the 'fourth wall' by using this theatrical technique, (traditionally deployed by male characters), to establish a collective connection, which is further extended to the viewers who are encouraged to support her (Darling, 2020). She uses this soliloquy to self-reflexively evaluate her experience at the club:

Tracey [to camera]: Eeee, I used to think my life was a bit crappy because nobody wanted me, but now I realise it could be worse. Everybody could want me.

This constructs her experience of (partial) engagement in sexually liberated behaviour as cultivating self-awareness and self-actualisation, leading her to 'realise' that for her sexual attractiveness is not so important. Yet while she celebrates being 'sexy', she must self-regulate to ensure she is not *too* sexualized.

By abstaining from sex, Tracey agentially ensures that she is not hypersexualised, resisting stigmatising tropes of black and working class femininity (West, 2008). Instead she regulates her desires and feelings of rejection through the fantasy of self-transformation. Silva argues that cultivating narratives of self-realisation is increasingly important for working class subjects, as traditional ‘coming of age’ markers fragment (Silva, 2013, p. 115). While Tracey’s self-regulation conforms to tropes of single femininity as chaste (Arrington, 2010), she *simultaneously* asserts herself as the ideal postfeminist sexually desiring subject.

### 6.2.2.3 Regulation through self-silencing

The single woman also constructs herself as affectively self-regulating through processes of self-silencing. An example of this is the Ford Fiesta ST-Line car advert, broadcast in the UK in March 2017, where a woman is trying to decide whether to buy a mid-range car (See Chapter 4.2.2). She is a slim, young, white woman, dressed attractively in tight jeans, trainers and a leather jacket. Advertising is characterised by an asymmetrical relationship between producer and viewer, where the advertiser has to persuasively attract not only the intended audience but also potentially uncommitted viewers (Bex, 1993). Singledom however is a stigmatised identity, which has often been overlooked by advertisers (Lai et al., 2015); and which the audience as a result perhaps does not want to identify with. Yet the Ford advert plays on and overcomes this dilemma by actively engaging with the stigma of singledom. Winship’s feminist analysis also claims that advertising incites postfeminist fantasies which ‘play into women’s sense of conceding to and rebuffing of patriarchal relations’ (Winship, 2000, p. 37). While the woman is constructed throughout the advert as a successful (economically) independent and agentic subject (See Chapter 6.2.3.1 for full discussion), in one of the pivotal scenes she self-silences to conform with the patriarchal ritual of the wedding.

In the scene, she is dressed in a garish pink 80s-style bridesmaid outfit with a dated hairstyle and heavy makeup. Her stigmatising appearance – placed in contrast to the beautiful, modern bride who stands opposite – links single femininity to historical tropes of unattractiveness (Arrington, 2010) while acknowledging the unfairness of her stigmatisation. She looks miserable, but so as to not upset the bride or interrupt the dress fitting, she forces a (*silent*) smile. In the next moment, she decides to buy the car, in which she drives off smiling. While she rebuffs traditional fantasies of heteronormative romance through her displeasure and escape, this is curtailed so that she doesn’t *directly* challenge these patriarchal structures. The woman does not disrupt the dress-fitting, which is still maintained as enjoyable for the bride, instead she regulates her emotions and stays silent<sup>40</sup>. Extending McRobbie’s theorization of the postfeminist masquerade where ‘aggression towards masculinity is sublimated into the mask of crafting a highly stylised mode of appearance...’ masking the fact that ‘patriarchal structures are still in place’

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<sup>40</sup> She does not speak out loud once during the advert.

(McRobbie, 2007, p. 725); her silence reinforces her stigmatised role within the patriarchal wedding ceremony. She sublimates and redirects her anger towards consumption, also reinscribing classed discourses (See also Chapter 6.2.3.1). Her silence not only *maintains* and reinforces her stigmatising positioning as unattractive, but simultaneously re-secures the fantasy of the happy bride, restabilising gender relations by reproducing normative femininity as heterosexually coupled.

#### 6.2.2.4 Intersubjective regulation of the self

Often it was through *intersubjective* peer regulation that single subjects in the media texts were urged to monitor their affective, behavioural and embodied states (Winch, 2012). Two key examples are found in *HTBS* and *Chewing Gum*. Fiske argues that the single-viewing, one-off, closed format of film means that such films have more power than TV (Fiske, 2010); therefore depictions in *HTBS* may be more insidiously regulatory in their effect. In *HTBS*, Alice's embodiment, affective state and behaviour are strongly regulated by her outspoken best friend Robin. Robin continually holds Alice accountable for her single status based on her failure to self-regulate. In one scene, Robin shames Alice for her ungroomed embodiment (a scene expanded on in the DVD outtakes), and warns she must conform to higher standards of physical attractiveness now she is single:

Robin: You have 'LTRP'.

Alice: Oh, my God. I do?

Robin: Yeah.

Alice: Tom gave it to me. For sure. Wait. What's LTRP?

Robin: Long-Term Relationship Pussy. It's like you dropped your hairbrush and your vagina caught it. I could make dreadlocks with that bush and form a reggae band.

Throughout the film Alice is also not allowed to choose *not* to attract a man, and we see Robin compel Alice to engage in compulsory sexual behaviour now she is single. At the beginning of the film, Robin entwines singledom with liberatory fantasies of sexual promiscuity as a way to discover the 'self':

Robin: You have a small window in which to bang your way through New York City.

Alice: No, Josh and I didn't break up so I could see other people. I'm trying to figure out who I am.

Robin: Then why don't you take this go home and stare at your beave?... I would like to see your tongue in that bartender's face.

Rather than 'finding herself' through an isolated period of introspection, Robin sees casual sex as the only way for Alice to explore her identity as a single subject and we see her urging Alice to approach groups of men in bars. But in a later scene, Robin declares that Alice's failure to keep such sexual

encounters casual and not become emotionally engaged with her sexual partners means that she has failed as a single subject. She demands that Alice regulates her affective state, warning that she must emulate the fantasy of an *emotionally detached* self-knowing subject, like her:

Robin: It's about me being sick of you just meeting guys and falling into their dick-sand.

Alice: Falling into their what?

Robin: Their dick-sand. It's like, every time a guy just looks at you, you just forget who you are, and, like... 'Oh!' You get sucked into their world. At least when I do decide I want a boyfriend, I'm gonna find someone who likes me for who I really am, because I know who the fuck that is.

Robin cautions Alice that she must follow her behavioural rules and continually monitors her: she checks when Alice texts the man she has slept with, at what time of day, and whether she uses emojis correctly, dictating how many drinks she has so she does not lose 'control' of her emotions. Robin continues to strictly regulate Alice's behaviour and cautions that she must resist sleeping with another person so she doesn't become emotionally 'attached'. Alice fails to do this and is later shown regretting her 'failure'.

The theme of intersubjective regulation of embodiment and behaviour also emerges in *Chewing Gum*. However, by contrast, Tracey responds in a more complex, more resistant ways. In E3, Tracey worries she is not attractive. She shares her concern with a group of her friends, who urge her to transform her behaviour and emotions, to present a 'confident' single self, who is self-regulating and restrained in her desires (Gill & Orgad, in press):

Candice: What do you say to these guys?

Tracey: Well. 'Hi, I just wanted to say that you're like the buffest guy ever. You remind me of that guy in the Freeman's catalogue when I was littler.'

All of her friends: Nooooo.

Candice: Tracey you *can't* just go up to a guy and expose yourself like that. Who does that?

Karly: You've got to wait for them to approach you.

Candice and Karly suggest that Tracey's style of sexual behaviour is abnormal. In so, doing they both 'other' Tracey for her active approach of men and normalise a passive, more regulated femininity who conceals her feelings. Tracey reacts with alarm at her friends' response. They then encourage her to alter her physical appearance to increase her sexual attractiveness:

Candice: You are beautiful! In a Whoopie Goldberg kinda ...

Karly: Germans would love ya. They love those sort of clothes

Candice: Or you can borrow my clothes.

Tracey: Ugh. No thanks! Germans Karly? So just, just go get myself to Germany? I can hardly afford to get myself earrings.

Her peers link her to historical tropes of unattractiveness and asexualisation, and draw on racialised and nationalist discourses of Germans as unfashionable. But while Tracey is upset by her friends' comments, she rejects them, refusing to adapt her appearance to conform to a hypersexualised femininity and highlighting the class-based exclusions of such regulation. Not only does Tracey defy normative beauty standards, but she also revalues her dark skin, moving away from what Tate has described as the 'negative aesthetic space' which darker skinned women inhabit, resisting the continued 'othering' of black embodiment with popular culture (Tate, 2017, p. 200). Tracey also subverts the racial hierarchy, rendering Germans – who are predominantly white – as undesirable.

Thus, in the media representations, the single subject is continually urged by herself and others to monitor and control her embodiment, affective state and behaviour. This is done through engagement in carefully cultivated sexualised behaviour, embodiment and self-silencing, and works to sustain the fantasy of the emotionally disengaged, sexually desiring and desirable single subject. Although in some instances, such as *Chewing Gum*, such racial and sexualised discourses are subverted.

### **6.2.3 Transforming the self: Behavioural, embodied and affective self-regulation**

#### **6.2.3.1 Transformation through consumption**

The media representations I analysed also construct the single female subject as required to conduct behavioural, embodied and affective self-regulation to *transform* herself – often through her *consumer* activity – into the fantasised 'independent' single subject seen in Chapter 5. Themes of agentic self-transformation are consistent with postfeminist makeover logics prevalent within self-help texts and reality television (Taylor, 2012). One of the most prominent forms of self-transformation in the media data (although also significant in the interviews, below) concerned affective transformation.

Discourses of self-transformation *through* consumption can be seen in the Ford Fiesta car advert, which is centred around affective regulation (See also Chapter 6.2.2.3). In the opening scene, a woman circles a car in a showroom, staring at the interior, inspecting the bodywork, while her own body is highlighted in the background; thus as she gazes at the car we are invited to gaze at her, conforming to gendered norms of sexualisation of the female body within advertising (Gill, 2009a). A close-up of her face shows an unsure expression. Her inner voice asks, 'I *know* I want it, but do I *deserve* it?' While the car at first holds her attention, she becomes 'held' by her own self-monitoring, internal gaze (Winship, 2000). We see her mind's eye flashing backwards, showing her completing various self-regulating tasks: exercising; watering plants; getting an eye test; being pleasant to those around her; make a presentation at work.



While previously she had been rapidly rewinding, she suddenly stops and replays in real-time a scene where she is attending a bridesmaid dress fitting and self-silences her discomfort (as discussed in Chapter 6.2.2.3). She immediately looks at the camera and says ‘Yeah’, confirming her decision to buy the car. This suggests that the wedding was the task for which she deserves *the greatest* self-reward. Her value is accrued via affective self-regulation: displaying a pleasing femininity which suppresses her anger, frustration and annoyance (Dobson, 2014; Elias, Gill, & Scharff, 2017, p. 24). It is this intense affective self-regulation which ‘earns’ her the ability to transform from a stigmatised subject to a free one *through* consumption. Once she, and the viewer, has approved her behaviour she self-transforms from a stigmatised, affectively self-regulating subject to a desirable free, independent one. But while her agency is limited to a classed, economic form of commodified resistance, her transformation is reduced to an individualized, masculinised form of independence – the ability to move freely in public space (Winship, 2000, p. 36). She can only enjoy her car, and paradoxically her freedom, once she has confirmed that she is a self-transforming subject, marking a narrower, less ambivalent construction than that seen in *Chewing Gum* and *Frances Ha*. It links the purchase of a car with ideas of (partial) emancipation from the stigma of singledom but, consistent with the narrow format of the advertising genre, reduces this freedom to the product on offer (Bex, 1993; Lazar, 2017)

### **6.2.3.2 Self-transformation and temporality**

*Delay, immediacy and futurity*

As I argued in Chapter 5, the performance of freedom operates temporally to require the perfect single subject to only be ‘free’ for *a certain period of time*. Themes of temporality were also tied to self-transformation, where the self was required to transform through affective regulation in a *short* timeframe and without delays into a heteronormative, coupled feminine subject at the correct age, in the correct order (Lahad, 2017). The *Elle* article ‘Meet Cutes Almost Ruined My Love Life’ cautions against delaying transition into a coupled subject by holding on to romantic fantasies. The author describes how years of watching romantic films caused her to ‘incorrectly’ prolong her singledom by imagining scenarios of how she might meet someone (‘a meet-cute’).

‘I proudly wore the ‘hopeless romantic’ label, blasted Taylor Swift’s love songs, and on every street corner I turned in New York, I fantasised about stumbling upon my meet-cute, too.’

The author then describes brief encounters with men, which she incorrectly obsessively thinks about for weeks or months. When she *does* meet suitable men, it is her emotional ‘over attachment’ to such ideals which prevents her from developing it into a full relationship and delays her coupledness:

‘I ... sabotaged things when we got to the “talking” stage because I ran away with my imagination.... I invested and obsessed so much in romanticizing a perfect beginning that I barely ever made it past the starting line.’

Rather than viewing such meetings as positive or pleasurable, they are deemed ‘failures’ solely because the author’s behaviour doesn’t produce a transformation into a coupled subject. It is only when the author manages to correctly emotionally regulate by letting go of her fantasies, and using a dating app, that she achieves the ‘success’, of a relationship:

‘Things changed when ... I downloaded Tinder. When I *finally* stopped obsessing over how a love story should start, one started.’

Thus, the performance of successful single femininity operates through the fantasy of the affectively regulating subject who has let go of romantic ‘obsessions’ to move on to heteronormative, coupled femininity.

Within a hyper-visual, commodified logic typical of the genre, *Elle* magazine stresses that the single subject is responsible for achieving affective and embodied self-transformation *quickly* in a feature called ‘11 Indelible Post Break Up Fashion Moments’. It displays pictures of celebrities who have gone through breakups only a month or two before and celebrates their speedy transformation into happy and confident subjects (Gill & Orgad, 2015), demonstrated *only* by their spectacular embodiment. The introduction says: ‘These stars bounced back with a bang, wearing bodycons and sleek suits to reiterate that they’re single and feeling good about it’. Successful single subjects are required to *immediately* repudiate negativity caused by a failed relationship, and become instantly happy, *through* transformation of their bodies (Dobson, 2014). However, while white bodies are celebrated in non-sexual terms as having ‘huge happy smiles’, as ‘bouncing back’ and ‘not backing down’, or in feminine ‘florals’, non-white women such as Kloe Kardashian<sup>41</sup> are framed in excessive, hypersexualised ways as wearing ‘va-va-voom’ outfits, while Jennifer Lopez is instead ‘nearly naked’. Non-white women are also constructed through historical tropes of deviancy and the disruptive ‘unruly woman’ (Rowe, 1995) (See Chapter 7.2.3.2), with Kardashian depicted as having an angry ‘revenge bod’, and Rihanna wearing a ‘smoking’ outfit. In an image that reinscribes heteronormative discourses of hypersexualisation of lesbian women, readers are encouraged to display breakup confidence by ‘taking a cue from Sandra Bullock’ who is described as ‘wearing Scarlett Johansson’s lips’, when she is pictured kissing her on stage. The single

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<sup>41</sup> Kloe Kardashian is mixed race – half white, half Armenian – however she and her family have been critiqued for actively cultivating a black beauty aesthetic (Elan, 2020).

subject must immediately switch from heartbroken and lonely to happy and desiring, and homosexuality is akin to an accessory which heterosexual women ‘put on’ to appear bold.

There is also a focus on *futurity*: by maximising ‘productivity’ as a regulatory single subject *now*, singles ensure successful ‘returns’ in the future. I define the contemporary moment as highly postfeminist; such a definition argues that postfeminist culture now contains competing – at times antithetical – discourses which *include* neoliberal feminist discourses, as evident here (See Chapter 1.4). Rottenberg argues that within a neoliberal feminist climate young, middle class, aspirational women are addressed by the fantasy of future fulfillment through career and family (Rottenberg, 2017). Such ‘balanced feminism’ is neoliberal as it requires women to manage their personal investments to ensure future happiness. As outlined above, coupledness is the ‘successful’ outcome of self-regulation in *Elle* and while there are moments of resistance, these are constructed through highly postfeminist fantasies. For example, returning to one woman profiled in the article ‘10 Women on Being Relentlessly Single Shamed by Their Parents’, Ana, 22, asserts that she does not aspire to be coupled. She uses the terminology of time ‘invested’ in developing a sense of herself which she cannot risk ‘losing’: ‘It took me a long time to feel the way I do about myself now; I’m not going to let someone else change that.’ However it is perhaps Ana’s youth that permits her to do this, as she has not reached an age where singledom has become socially unacceptable (Lahad, 2017, p. 35).

I have shown how in the media representations the single subject is required to identify and cultivate the ‘authentic’ self, which must then be continually protected, revealed or hidden, at particular moments. The single subject has to perform intensive self-surveillance, through a process of ‘self-empowerment’, to rapidly transform themselves into a calculating and rational, confident, happy, sexually desiring subject. Such self-surveillance operates both through the self and intersubjectively, to incite her to achieve affective, behavioural and embodied transformation. Transformation is reduced to the self, rather than structural changes, and works to sustain rather than challenge the heterosexual coupled norm. Yet where such discourses are intersected with race, there is both a reinscribing of and a subversion of racial hierarchies. In *Chewing Gum* there is a revaluing of non-hypersexualised forms of black femininity and sexuality. In short, successful singledom is constructed as a fantasy of continual surveillance, regulation and transformation – according to strict temporal limits, in ways which ensure maximum future ‘returns’. The second half of the chapter will now examine how these fantasies were negotiated by the interview participants.

### **6.3 Single women’s narratives**

#### **6.3.1 ‘Finding’ the self: discovery and loss**

The women I interviewed also spoke about their desire to identify, cultivate and maintain a sense of self while single. As Budgeon suggests, young women are increasingly self-reflexively constructing

themselves as ‘self-authoring’ (Budgeon, 2003, p. 44), and this was evident in my interviewees’ accounts. They frequently referred to the idea of being single as an empowering process and/or a period through which they could identify their ‘real self’. For example, drawing on individualising narratives, Hannah, 39, describes how she is using time being single to discover her ‘true self’ allowing her to make decisions about her life ‘free’ from societal influences or others’ regulation.

The fantasy of singledom as a process of self-discovery was also taken up by Maria, a white middle class 42-year-old woman who moved to London five years ago from Europe. She has been single for eight years, after a two-year relationship ended. Since then she has had one two-month relationship. Maria describes her singledom in positive terms as ‘a blessing’ *because* it is an opportunity to get to ‘know yourself deeply’. However, there were moments of deep ambivalence towards this idea of singledom as a period of self-discovery. They included expression of negative feelings, bordering on sense of compulsion to find their ‘real self’. Mandy, 25, for example, frames singledom as a chance to get to know herself, yet she also shows reluctance:

Mandy: I think that thing that I guess I’ve always been avoiding about, to actually, getting to know myself and being comfortable with myself so like... people always say that like if you’re not comfortable with yourself you can never make an actual good relationship so I think like actually being with, like I have to make a relationship with myself first.

In saying that she has previously *avoided* getting to ‘know’ herself, Mandy suggests that it is an uncomfortable or challenging process for her. She frames this as something that she is obliged to do, demonstrated by ‘I have to’; and naturalises it as ‘always said’ by others, which she receives as an unequivocal instruction, as a compulsory step to be completed in *preparation* for a relationship. Similarly, Annette, a white, 30-year-old, heterosexual woman, like Ana, 22, in *Elle* magazine (See Chapter 6.2.1, above), takes up the fantasy of singledom as a period through which to rediscover and redefine her ‘self’, which has been altered or distorted by a relationship:

‘When I have a serious relationship I usually take like a good six months afterwards to just be like “who am I again?” and like redefine myself... obviously the longer the relationship then that takes me a little bit longer as well...’

Yet unlike the previous interviewees, instead of only using singledom to find ‘who’ she is, Annette constructs her single self in more complex ways. She suggests that this is a mutable, rather than stable, self, one which can be ‘redefined’, and thus by implication altered or shifted. Indeed, Annette describes how the longer she has been coupled, the longer this process of re-self-discovery or redefinition takes, suggesting that being coupled threatens to erode her fantasised self. Cultivation of self-knowledge is

constructed as a desirable, positive state which is achieved through intense self-reflexivity (Foucault, 1988). Annette goes on to indicate deep psychic discomfort around what she perceives as a loss of or lack of self in her last relationship:

Annette: 'I never was fully me ... I was sort of just like yeah toned down, was like 80% or 70% and I didn't realise it and now I'm sort of like '[Annette], what were you doing?' Like how like, I'm not ashamed, but I'm just like, I never want to do that again I never want to compromise on who I am...'

Annette told me she feels compelled to not 'allow' an eclipsing of the self and scolds herself – asking 'what were you doing' – for behaving in what she constructs as disingenuous ways, 'I never was fully me', and as a painful compromise. Later Annette says she intensively worked to try and maintain an independent sense of self when coupled, but this is not something which she believes can actually be achieved. Yet Annette remains cruelly attached to this fantasy of maintaining the self '100%' in a relationship (Berlant, 2011), articulating herself as failure to live up to this fantasy in quantifiable measures: becoming 'like 80% or 70%' of her 'authentic' self. Going further than Annette, Laura, 24, positions herself *against* a dominant romantic narrative of coupledness as a 'completion' of the self:

Laura: I don't need a better half or whatever ... and I think that's also why the two brief relationships that I had last year didn't work out... I was like ... 'You're not an extension of myself'...

Laura thus prioritises her desire to maintain her sense of self *over* being in a relationship. But she says she does not think that maintaining a sense of self in a relationship is impossible, and instead works to blur this binary: 'I've started like going to a more independent erm conception of relationships.' Yet going against these regulatory binary discourses of singledom and coupledness is not without personal cost for her – resulting in the loss of relationships.

### **6.3.2 Regulation of the self: surveillance and resistance**

While the interviewees performed intensive affective, behavioural and embodied self-regulation, rather than experiencing this as empowering, as in the media representations, the single women largely found them deeply distressing, especially in relation to embodiment, sexuality and self-silencing. Many felt extreme pressure to conform to the norms of heterosexual attractiveness and highlighted a concern – a particularly ethnic minority women – with not appearing *too* sexualised. Such self-regulation however largely operated affectively, with many women discussing the intense affective labour they endured to embody a postfeminist 'pleasing' single femininity (McRobbie, 2015).

#### **6.3.2.1 Embodiment and sexuality**

Several of the women interviewed expressed upset that their bodies did not align with those in media representations, an anxiety which was intensified by their singledom. A good example of this is Annette. While Annette is very slim, she told me of the distress she felt when younger for not having what she saw as the ‘correct’ embodiment depicted within the media:

Annette: ‘I was feeling so much body shame because women were just represented as like very thin, kind of boyish and I’ve always had hips and boobs! Very curvy. And so I was not the ideal of what the media said was a beautiful woman... like it’s shifted, but ...’

While she doesn’t actively cultivate her embodiment, she experiences this fantasised embodiment at the *psychic* level as deeply regulating, underscoring the impact that the significance of the body in postfeminist culture (Elias et al., 2017, p. 25) has on women. Despite a perceived media ‘shift’ she feels deep concern over her sense that she does not align with what she sees on screen<sup>42</sup>. There is anxiety over conforming to ‘the push and pull of sexiness’ in embodiment and sexuality (Dobson, 2014) being intensified for single women of non-white ethnicity. This is demonstrated by Vanessa. Vanessa, 36, is a heterosexual south-east Asian woman who moved to London 11 years ago following the break-up of a three-year relationship and has been single for three years. Before that she was in a long 12-year relationship. She was engaged to both men. Vanessa described the mediated pressure to conform to fantasised norms of ‘attractive’ heterosexy embodiment and affective states on social media and dating apps (Dobson, 2014):

Vanessa: The pressure on myself... some of the guys are like, ‘If you don’t look like you picture, you’re buying drinks until you do.’ And we have this kind of Instagram ... you only take pictures of yourself when you look good and you’re happy or you know a little bit sexy so there’s a pressure to look your best all the time.

Thus dissatisfaction with embodiment is insidiously intertwined with the pressure to cultivate an upbeat disposition. Vanessa said she does yoga to regulate her body: ‘[It’s] nothing to do with yoga, it was about how quickly you can lose weight.’ Unlike in the media representations, this physical regulation was never articulated as empowering, instead it is part of the pressure to conform to an image. Thus there was a deep ambivalence about the heterosexually attractive fantasised ideal: while Vanessa didn’t believe all that such an ideal promised, she could not fully relinquish it. Vanessa experienced additional pressure surrounding her South East Asian ethnicity saying that men wanted to know immediately where she was ‘from’ and that made her feel sexually objectified. She also expressed anxiety over appearing

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<sup>42</sup> Maria told me she does not feel curvy *enough*, demonstrating that while constructions of the ideal sexually attractive body type weren’t consistent, the feeling of inadequacy around self-embodiment was.

promiscuous (a historical trope linked to ethnic minority women (West, 2008)) saying because of this she avoided discussing her dating life with friends (see Chapter 6.3.2.2). But she also spoke of fear that her sexual attractiveness is waning with age, intersecting this with race:

Vanessa: I'm also reaching that age where I can't really keep up anymore [on dating apps]... Lucky I'm Asian so I look a bit younger than my age but still I cannot compete [with other women] on age you know.

Thus I felt that both pressures worked in competition, pulling her in different directions in a double form of regulation. Building on Vanessa's concerns, sexual promiscuity, instead of being an opportunity to discover the self through the fantasised 'freedom' of emotionally unengaged sex (see also Intersubjective Regulation below), it was constructed as problematic, as a *failure* of the single subject to 'correctly' affectively monitor and regulate her embodiment, behaviour and affective state.

#### **6.3.2.2 Self-silencing**

There was evidence of significant self-silencing around the topic of singledom, which the women experienced as very painful (See also Chapter 7.3.1.1). Self-silencing operated in two ways: as inhibition, produced by a feeling that they were not being heard, or sense that they are not able to speak due to *other's* judgement; and as intentional, as a deliberate desire not to want to speak (Carpenter & Austin, 2007). For example, Vanessa, when asked if her family mention her singleness, answers with respect to *herself* and her unwillingness to discuss it for fear of judgement:

'No, no, not at all. ... I have ehm, emotional obligations to my family though so I do not want to introduce any guys to my family. Unless he's actually saying he's going to marry me. There's no point, there's no point, there's no point for them to know what kind of guys I'm dating .... my, my family I need to protect them because they have seen three boyfriends that I come in and say I, am I going to marry them, right? And this is not happening, we were planning weddings and everything, erm so I want to spare that, for them, I'm just single... My sister who I'm very close to, I don't even tell her.'

Vanessa suggests she has a self-regulatory duty *not* to mention her singleness to her parents to 'protect' them from disappointment. She repeats the words 'there's no point' rendering her current status as purposeless. In describing this duty to be silent as an 'obligation', she suggests that to discuss her singledom would upset her parents, an incremental stress which would only increase with each boyfriend who is introduced to them. It seems that her singledom is an emotional burden, symbolising a failure of her duty towards her parents to couple and marry, something that she must keep shamefully hidden. Vanessa's intimate life as a single person is rendered unspeakable to her parents and her sister as it falls out-with the boundaries of normative coupled femininity. Such self-silencing was also experienced by

Vanessa in relationship to friends. She says that while she *does* discuss dating with friends, she is selective about who, and what she tells them and evocatively used the metaphor of physical re-wounding to explain the act of retelling:

Vanessa: I tell some of my friends ... I don't tell one friend everything I sort of like disperse, because it's it's an emotional turmoil every time because they will then say ... did ... something come out of it? I say no it's failure....it's failure, you would have to rip off your wound again [gestures digging at her arm], to explain what happened in that wound to your friends and I'd rather not... you don't want to talk about your failures ... it's less a failure if I don't have to talk about it.

Vanessa experiences a double burden of significant pain, from *both* the failure to successfully couple, and from the 'failure' felt when recounting this to friends. Vanessa manages and reduces her pain by avoiding the topic, or only partially recounting her 'failures' – suggesting that if she stays silent – she doesn't have to fully acknowledge the pain. The fact that she cannot tell any one friend 'everything' suggests that she feels she has to hide different parts of herself, regulating which aspects of herself appear, and ensuring that only the 'correct' self appears at certain times.

### **6.3.2.3 Intersubjective regulation of the self: traumatic encounters**

In the interviews, women told me that intersubjective regulation from others operated largely through silencing and affective regulation. As I will demonstrate, such regulation was often experienced as traumatic, and was rarely resisted, particularly when it came from family members. Once more the women drew on discourses of generational differences, intertwined with race and ethnicity to cope with and reduce the trauma that this caused. And while such regulation was sometimes resisted, there was evidence of the profound psychic impact it had.

#### *Family, culture and race*

Several of the younger interviewees told me that family members frequently asked them if they were 'still' single, with Daniella, 21, saying she had been repeatedly asked since age 19. One of the South East Asian women described the pressure they felt to conform to the coupled norm in relation to her cultural background. Abby is a 30-year-old, bisexual, South East Asian woman who has lived in London for six years and has been single for four months, having come out of a 10-year on-and-off relationship. Like Vanessa, Abby uses her ethnicity to explain the overt parental pressure that she feels, but works to minimise and reject this – describing how it is her *parent's* racially-based anxiety, not hers:

Abby: In my culture once you've past 25 you've gone past your sell by date, you're basically in the clearance basket ... and that's really concerned my parents ... it ... keeps them up at night ... and I



think particularly my mother because it's her generation as well ... growing up in Communist China ... but for me, if it weren't for that I wouldn't think about it at all.

Abby highlights what she calls a different attitude to single women in Asia, which is othered and marked out politically as 'less progressive' than London, aligning herself with 'Westernised' fantasies of singledom, yet still calling it 'her culture'. She also draws on generational differences to further 'other' and resist these racialised discourses, describing her parents as temporally 'past', as unable to catch up to the present, to minimise and reduce the discomfort that it produces in her. When she boldly asserts that she 'wouldn't think about it at all', if it weren't for her parents, she betrays the fact that it does deeply affect her.

#### *Behavioural and affective regulation*

There was evidence of friends encouraging behavioural and affective regulation in order for the single subject to achieve coupledness – rather than enjoy the fantasised 'freedom' of liberated sexuality which is depicted by Robin and Alice in *HTBS* (above). However, comments from friends were, like the characters Alice and Tracey, often experienced in regulatory ways. Anna is a 36-year-old, middle class, queer woman. She has been single for most of her life, with one serious relationship ending when she was 20, and a few casual sexual relationships since. Anna says that friends' comments over her failure to affectively regulate have led her to therapy. But by contrast to Tracey in *Chewing Gum*, Anna does not show resistance and works to alter her behaviour accordingly via therapy:

Anna: 'I have had some counselling to try and sort of perhaps get over the fact that a lot of friends would describe me as putting up barriers to relationships.'

While Anna presents having therapy as positive – a privilege she can afford as a middle-class subject – she also desires to alter her behaviour. This suggests that she retains a significant psychic investment in normative coupledness but *also* in cultural logics of single femininity characterised by fantasies of self-transformation, empowerment and self-cultivation (Taylor, 2012, p. 167). Such a tricky tension, rather than being reconciled is maintained by the fact she is using therapy to 'trying to, sort of, perhaps' become a desirable coupled subject (See also Chapter 6.3.3.3 below).

#### *Intersubjective silencing*

Alison Winch describes the 'girlfriend gaze' as a system of mutual governance between peers which constitutes a form of 'postfeminist sisterhood' (Winch, 2012). However rather than supportive, this sisterhood is harnessed as a collective self-policing of femininity to ensure compliance with beauty norms and a refusal of negative emotions (Winch, 2012). It is suggested here that intersubjective governance occurs not just between close female friendships, but it is extended, particularly inter-generationally,

between family members. Rather than *only* operating visually through the gaze, governance also operates through silences in conversation, or in the absence of conversation. This silent regulation applies differently with *close* family members, with the regulatory gaze being felt much more keenly from parents – particularly mothers – to sustain the coupled norm (See Chapter 7.3.1.2).

Several of the interviewees in their thirties described how moments of silence were temporally regulated, noting that while they *used* to be asked about their relationship status by friends or family, they no longer were. Hannah is a white, 39-year-old heterosexual, middle class woman who has lived in London for almost 20 years and works in the creative industries. Her longest relationship (3 years) ended 20 years ago and her most recent relationship (6 months) ended 6 months ago. While she describes herself as having ‘lots’ of relationships in-between, she notes that they have been getting shorter, something she is not happy about:

Hannah: People are like ‘Oooooooo.’ You know? ‘So, you don’t want to have children then?’ Or people kind of start to stop asking... I used to think that ... too when I ... knew people, like 39 ... I was like ‘Oh god I wonder if they you know want to have kids or want to meet somebody?’... We’re so programmed to do that!

Interviewer: So, people have stopped asking you?

Hannah: Yeah. Oh god, I don’t know, it’s quite hard to say. I think sometimes it’s unspoken but I do feel it, but then you don’t know if you’re projecting onto other people but ... there’s definitely there’s definitely this pressure at this age being a woman and being single it’s extreme, the pressure that you feel from all angles. [Ooooofff!]

While friends have ‘start[ed] to stop’ asking, Hannah feels her singledom remains an unspoken question and senses they silently speculate about it. When I pressed her to explain, Hannah simply described a troubling, intangible feeling of ‘pressure’. As with Joan (below), she turns the regulatory gaze inward, saying she is complicit in exerting pressure on *herself* and in ‘projecting’ such pressure onto others. Yet it is clear she also feels an externalized pressure stemming from what she describes as a collective ‘programming’. Thus, she experiences a double external *and* internal silent expectation and incitement to conform to fantasies of coupledness and motherhood, which has a significant effect. Her sense of discomfort, expressed in an ‘oooooff’ sound, demonstrates the inarticulable nature of her regulation.

The women were acutely aware of the regulatory force of such conversations, sometimes constructing those who did bring it up as ‘insensitive’. Caroline is a 50-year-old black, middle class woman, who has always lived in London and has been single for three years, with her last relationship lasting around a year. She describes how her troubled relationship with her mother growing up – who was also single – means that they are estranged. When asked if the rest of her family talk about it, she says:

Caroline: No no, they don't no. They don't, they're very sensitive, not to touch on it. Yeah they don't, no. I wonder, they know my mother though and I think they may just think I just take after my mother who has always been single so yeah so erm I'm sure that they wonder but they've never erm sort of voiced that.

Thus, discussion of Caroline's single status was *experienced* as a regulatory force, even when it didn't occur, demonstrating that she felt required to refuse an identification with her single status. Caroline describes how 'of course' it was a subject which would not be brought up by those who were sensitive, repeatedly stressing the word 'no', constructing such her identity as 'unspeakable', taboo and undesirable, and underscoring the significant psychic tension the pressure to conform to coupled femininity produced.

Silencing was particularly regulatory when it came from family members, especially mothers<sup>43</sup> (See also Chapter 7.3.1.2). Joan for example experiences her mother's silence around the topic of her singledom in deeply painful ways. She palpably described to me how her mother's gaze worked as a form of acute intersubjective regulation. Joan is a black, 47-year-old heterosexual, middle class woman, who has always lived in London and says she has been single for all of her life, but she highlights that she has gone on one or two dates<sup>44</sup>:

Joan: She's a real Nigerian woman so really had wanted me to meet somebody... Right now, she hasn't spoken about it. She may do ... It's very difficult to talk to her about it 'cause she's frustrated with where I'm at... She tends to look at what I'm wearing, but looking at the *way* I'm wearing what shoes, what clothes you know and she would say 'You don't look', basically she would say, 'You don't look attractive, you don't look...' ... So it's very, she's quite raw, you know, sort of when I might be talking to her about my day and she won't listen, she'll be looking at, seeing what earrings I'm wearing, whether I got you know what's my hair like, the clothes, so it's very um distracting she doesn't erm probably doesn't know .... how to reassure, erm or to handle the situation yeah and to talk to me ... she knows that I might get, I'm very, I can be sensitive so she knows that she, she can't say something, otherwise I'll get upset.

Like Abby and Vanessa, Joan draws on her mother's nationality to account for her views, 'othering' them to distance herself from the pain they induce. While she thinks that her mother hopes that she will meet someone, it is her mother's disappointment over her single status which she feels mostly keenly.

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<sup>43</sup> While fathers' silences were also experienced as regulatory, they were largely collapsed under 'parents' – as with Vanessa.

<sup>44</sup> Several interviewees said that while the relationships they had were short, sometimes just a few dates, this did not mean that they were not significant to them.

Her mother's silent scrutiny of her physical appearance causes Joan to turn her gaze on herself and renders her responsible for her 'failure' to transform into a sexually attractive subject (Winch, 2012). Her mother's intense focus on her appearance prioritises her singleness over *other* aspects of her life – she is interested in this to the exclusion of all else, not listening to what she says. Aligning with postfeminist culture, her mother locates her femininity within her embodiment and presentation as a sexually attractive subject (Gill, 2017). While Joan describes how her mother is careful not to mention her singledom to avoid upsetting her, it is something which Joan feels she references *indirectly* and in painfully 'raw' ways. The silence around the topic is therefore highly regulatory in its effects. The self-transformation into a coupled subject is a heavy duty which Joan must fulfil to meet parental expectations and fulfil the fantasy of normative coupledness.

### **6.3.3 Transformation of the self: behavioural, embodied and affective self-regulation**

As in the media representations, many of the interviewees were working on the self in order to attempt embodied, affective and behavioural self-transformation into a fantasised 'desirable' single, or coupled, state. However, this was often experienced in troubling ways where they were seduced by, but sought to also resist, fantasies of self-transformation.

#### **6.3.3.1 Discourses of consumption: pleasure and pain**

Far from being *empowered* by discourses of self-transformation through consumption, several women indicated that they felt drawn to, but deeply regulated by them, particularly with respect to the beauty industry. The significant tensions they told of over how to negotiate appeals to self-transform by the beauty industry were epitomised by Diane. Diane, 28, is a white, bisexual woman who recently moved to London from the north of England to study. Her last relationship ended 9 months ago and consisted of a few dates and text messages. She does not wear make-up, her long light brown hair is loosely tied back from her face and she wears plain, dark, androgynous-style loose clothing. While Diane does not conform to beauty norms, she reveals a confused and conflicted response when discussing YouTube make-up vloggers. This genre has been celebrated for promoting women's empowerment and entrepreneurialism but also critiqued for an intensification of modes of self-surveillance (Banet-Weiser, 2017). Despite finding their messages 'toxic', rejecting them through her stylisation, she says that they nevertheless appeal to her:

'These YouTubers for instance ... you know they talk about make-up... it worries me that there is this sort of a toxic femininity going on... a lot of women of course are very beautiful on their videos and they're all sort of done up nicely and they're very attractive ... I, I sometimes ... look at myself looking at that and think it's worrying that you're watching this...and of course it's important to be beautiful, important to be k.... well is it?'

Diane feels caught up by aspirational portrayals of normative beauty standards, but critiques herself for watching them, experiencing a double layer of regulation. While the desire to beautiful is ‘important’ – she distances herself from this desire by turning it into a generalised statement. She immediately questions herself, demonstrating the internal conflict that she feels over her consumption of the videos. Despite being gay<sup>45</sup>, Diane is caught within what Berlant calls the ‘cruel optimism’ of maintaining a heterosexual attractiveness while acknowledging the violence that these discourses enact within her, stopping her from realising those very desires, and producing significant pain (Berlant, 2011, p. 2).

### **6.3.3.2 Self-transformation and temporality**

Taking up fantasies of transformation identified in the media representations, there was concern among the younger women that they self-transform into coupledness within a certain timeframe. They indicated the psychic investment in and threat that falling outside those temporal limitations posed to them. Daniella is a 21-year-old lesbian who had just moved to London from the north of the UK, who has had one relationship of 9 months. Daniella talked about having reached the ‘milestone’ of having had a relationship:

Daniella: If you’re like ‘I’ve never dated anyone’ that can seem a bit like alienating and weird especially like as you get older. I didn’t get my first girlfriend until I was like 19 which I think was later than a lot of people ... I think you feel like you’re a bit behind, where you should be ... whereas ... I feel like lots of people have only dated one person – that’s not that odd!

Daniella not only self-monitors, but also horizontally monitors the progress of those around her to ensure that she doesn’t stray from these temporal limits, carefully ‘keeping up’ according to the timeframe set by her peers, having ‘lagged behind’ (Lahad, 2016a; Winch, 2012). To avoid the threat of being ‘othered’ as abnormal, Daniella is anxious to ensure she matures appropriately. Drawing on postfeminist logics, she has ‘bought’ herself some time by ‘finally’ having a relationship. But she says the temporal threat of immaturity will re-emerge if she stays single:

‘When I get to the point where my friends are in like very, very serious relationships... I think maybe then it might become more of a presence because it might feel again like I would be behind...’

Another younger woman, Sonya, applied the opposite logic, to suggest that her age means that she must *delay* transformation into a coupled subject. Sonya, 22, says she is too young to be pressured by her family to marry: ‘No. No. I think I’m a bit, it’s still a bit too early for that!’, countering media discourses.

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<sup>45</sup> While Diane self-defines as bisexual, she says she mainly is attracted to women.

Yet when imagining her future in five years' time, she sustains the fantasy of coupling and marriage, demonstrating that she does not plan to delay for *too* long. Both women suggest they must self-transform at the 'correct' time to comply with socially-temporal norms of single femininity (Lahad, 2016a).

The intersection of temporal discourses of maturity, age and futurity were illuminated by one of the older women, Gemma, a 39-year-old white heterosexual woman who has been single for a year, after a relationship of 18 months ended. Before that she was single for 7 years, with her longest relationship lasting 3 years. At several points in the interview she links herself to *undesirable* discourses of stalled development and immaturity as she points out that she still wears braces, showing embarrassment. However, she went on to conflictually argue that she has matured while being single:

Gemma: 'The whole like idea of being you know older, and my age, is much easier, easier, much easier if I, easier to take if I, realise that, that's actually me putting a lot more value on my time. I used to look at it as a lot of ...wasted time ... things haven't turned out how I imagined ... I thought I would be with someone and had kids or at least choosing to have kids or had a choice, and its rapidly getting to the point where I feel like I won't have that choice anymore. [Quietly] Erm, so I kinda handle that... But it also you know there are other lives to live ... a different frame of ... what life looks like. [Louder] I've now got this like plan that I'm going to learn Korean ...then I'm going to go to Korea ... and... if someone else comes along they'll just get in the way ...'

Gemma uses an understanding of her time as increasingly 'valuable', to argue that she now handles her time more 'wisely'. But her repetition of the word 'easier' indicates a hesitation and a discomfort, suggesting that – contrary to being easy, this is actually very difficult. She betrays the psychic pain that being an older single who challenges these temporal limits causes her. Her use of the word 'rapidly' suggests an urgency to conform to the heterosexual familial fantasy and her pain over this time panic is not fully resolved, as she quietly says she only 'kinda handle[s] that'. In a louder voice to cover up her discomfort she presents her alternative vision, drawing on the fantasy seen in the media texts of singledom as a time for self-fulfillment and growth. She makes sense of the disconnect between what she had hoped for and the reality of her life by creating a future which does not involve the nuclear family. Instead it features a transformation of the self through learning and travel. She creates an alternative vision of 'having a life' by drawing on less conventional objects so she is still affectively recognised (Berlant, 2008, p. 7). But the passage indicates the significant work the older single subject must carry out to negotiate and manage the pain caused by falling outside normative institutions of intimacy as she matures.

### **6.3.3.3 Self-transformation: reinscribing and challenging the coupled norm**

Themes of affective self-transformation were significant, with several of the middle-class women telling me that they have had therapy to transform their affective state into the fantasised confident, empowered, autonomous, emotionally self-regulating single subject. They reinforced those therapeutic discourses found in multiple media representations and self-help texts orientated towards women (Gill & Orgad, 2015). But several interviewees discussed how their self-transformation was performed not as an end in itself, but to prepare themselves for coupledness. Drawing on discourses of empowerment, Maria, 42, says that with the help of a therapist, she has self-transformed from an ‘undesirable’ affective state of isolation and instability into a state of confidence and autonomy:

‘I find myself very lonely... This has pushed me to... a lot of work on myself with the help of a therapist which has been an amazing ... I’ve become a completely different person. Getting to know myself better has raised my confidence. I am also learning how learning to raise boundaries, err, to put myself first a bit more.’

Maria places responsibility on herself to fix her ‘undesirable’ affective state through intensive self-awareness and transformation. When asked about whether she would like to meet someone, she says that this would risk ‘spoiling’ her self-work, and she is at pains to refute the idea that she is ‘desperate to meet someone’. But she goes on to say conversely that this self-work means she is prepared to have a ‘healthy’ relationship if it came along. Thus while she does not centre her affective transformation around preparation for coupledness, this remains a desirable ‘outcome’. She thus fails to fully relinquish the fantasies of coupledness *or* singledness and places herself liminally between the two states (Berlant, 2008).

In contrast to Maria and the media representations, Gemma describes how she has used therapy to address feelings of loneliness. But rather than framing loneliness in solely negative terms she describes how this has led her to want *retain* her singledness, and embrace her feelings of loneliness, therefore resisting the dominant narrative:

‘I’ve been like back in therapy, working on a lot of stuff cause like you know ‘cause I have huge feelings of loneliness, ... I was reading this book recently and there was this line in it, which kind of sums it up ... “long loneliness is better than bad company”.’

While Gemma doesn’t fully reject the fantasy of happy coupledness, she does suggest that socially isolated singledness is better for her than ‘unhappy’ coupledness and partially revalues the trope of the isolated single woman. Gemma provides an alternative vision of a self-regulating single subject who, while still been hailed by and sustaining middle-class therapeutic discourses, *embraces* rather than transforms, at

least temporarily, her feelings of loneliness. She also challenges the postfeminist affective register of maintaining a positive attitude and repudiating pain (Elias et al., 2017, p. 25).

The ideal single subject is constructed as compelled to self-transform through intensive self-regulation into a fantasised affective state marked by autonomy, confidence, and happiness. This self-transformation compels the single self to prepare for normative coupledness, and this discourse is only *partially* challenged. Yet this is also a distinctly classed self-transformation, part of a wider therapy culture which is addressed only to the middle class, self-improving feminine subject<sup>46</sup>.

#### **6.4 Conclusion: troubled boundaries of self**

The single subject, across both the media representations and women's accounts, is *compelled* to ensure that she continually identifies and maintains her 'authentic' stable single self through multiple forms of affective, behavioural and embodied regulation. She must direct this self-regulation towards transforming herself into a fantasised, desirable physical, behavioural and emotional state. The successful single subject is constructed as self-accountable for her affective and embodied state and is also subject to the intensive surveilling gaze of those around her, both peers and family.

The 'authentic' self which emerges across the media texts is a free, independent, confident and autonomous subject, suggesting a stark *uniformity* of self, which reinvigorates postfeminist discourses of femininity. Interviewees similarly articulated singledom as a pleasurable, empowering process of self-discovery, through which they identified an independent, agentic and autonomous self. Yet the interview data revealed deeper tensions inherent in this process. The women I spoke with talked about how they feel *compelled* to conduct intensive self-surveillance yet at times expressed significant anxiety over the impossibility of being able to fully maintain and protect this fantasised self. These accounts often positioned the maintenance of the 'authentic' self as being unreconcilable with either coupledness or alternative forms of social connection, reinforcing this regulatory binary.

Across both representations and lived experience, the single subject was required, by themselves and those around them, to self-regulate according to strict heterosexual norms of sexual attractiveness and embodiment *and* to present themselves as liberated, desiring sexual subjects. Yet they also had to ensure they were not *too* sexualised, particularly ethnicity minority women. Fantasies of sexual liberation identified in the media representations paradoxically worked to circumscribe the single woman's behaviour and affective state and drew on historically stigmatising discourse of unattractiveness or promiscuity. The single subject had to engage in intensively regulated 'sexually liberated' behaviour,

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<sup>46</sup> As Eva Illouz argues, to be emotionally intelligent is a prerogative of the middle class subject (Illouz, 2007).



according to strict rules of contact, embodiment and emotional self-regulation. These discourses were deeply problematised through intersections with race and class, with representations that continue to regulate ideals of respectability and deviancy for non-white, non-middle-class single subjects.

Yet the women I spoke to revealed strong resistance to fantasies of sexual liberation as a form of self-discovery. The interviewees largely experienced these discourses as deeply regulating and upsetting rather than empowering, particularly in relation to embodiment. Intersections of race were central in this context: several ethnic minority women talked about how they felt compelled to intensively regulate themselves to negotiate the combined pressures of being a heteronormatively attractive subject, yet not become overly sexualised. And while they discussed how they actively rejected horizontal forms of surveillance from family and friends, they nevertheless found them profoundly painful and impossible to resist.

While the cultural representations often depict the successful self-regulating single subject as transforming into a happy, bold, sexually attractive and confident self who repudiates pain, even after a breakup, this work is often achieved *only* through consumption and affective regulation. As seen in Chapter 5, self-transformation is again temporally mediated, particularly for younger singles, as something which must be achieved quickly, but not too quickly, to ensure later gains – often of coupledness and the nuclear family – in the *future*. Thus, single subjects are caught between irreconcilable regulatory discourses which require them to both cultivate an independent sense of self yet also surrender that independence within (eventual) coupledness.

Within the interviews, while many of the single women I spoke to were enticed into intensive self-transformation, particularly through therapeutic discourses, there were signs of resistance. Discourses of freedom were not only used to counter fantasies of coupledness, but they were also used as a basis through which alternative, more diverse fantasies emerged, which decentred the coupled, familial norm. Yet again, the women often betrayed moments of deep ambivalence towards these alternative visions, with happiness intermingled with sadness and a continued attachment, or desire to maintain a close proximity to, the coupled norm. There was more radical evidence of resistance to the requirement to maintain an upbeat affective state, and some single women actively embraced difficult emotions.

The severe penalties of failing to sustain the single subject according to those regulatory processes and limitations will now be explored in the final empirical chapter, Chapter 7.

## Chapter 7. The ‘failed’ single subject: (re)negotiating the boundaries of feminine subjectivity

### 7.1 Introduction

In chapter 5 and 6, I argued that the ‘ideal’ feminine single subject is produced through celebratory discourses of freedom, independence, agency and autonomy, but this is *simultaneously* achieved through deeply regulatory discourses of intensive self-surveillance, through which such a subject must be continually monitored and maintained. The single subject is thus incited to engage in an intensive regime of self-surveillance, self-regulation and self-transformation, which rather than liberatory, often sustains the heterosexual gendered matrix and reinscribes postfeminist ideals of feminine subjectivity as (eventually) coupled. In this chapter I argue that when the single subject fails to become ‘free’ and fails to ‘correctly’ self-survey according to these rules, there is an abjectifying *failure* of the single subject and a threatening or even an undoing of the ‘performance’ of normative femininity (Butler, 1990).

I build on Judith Butler’s claim that subject positions are, ‘produced in and through an exclusionary logic of repudiation and abjection,’ (Butler, 2011, p. 76), to argue that the ‘viable’ (heterosexually coupled) feminine subject is partly sustained through the exclusionary abjectionification of single femininity. Butler suggests that the heterosexual matrix works by constructing certain ‘subjects’ as abject: ‘This exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet ‘subjects’, but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject. (Butler, 2011, p. 3). As Butler elaborates: ‘the production of the *unsymbolizable*, the *unspeakable*, the *illegible*, is also always a strategy of abjection’ (Butler, 2011, p. 142). While I do not suggest that the single woman is positioned fully outside the boundaries of feminine subjectivity as a political subject, I extend Butler’s logic to argue that the single woman is still abjectified in ways which put her subjectivity into question. The abjectionification of the single woman is a *process* which operates through three mechanisms across the media representations and interview data: silencing, invisibility and incoherence.

The single woman is silenced in the media representations in ways which abjectly trouble and erase her as a ‘viable’ subject and sustain the patriarchal gender hierarchy and the norm of coupledness (Roseneil, et al., 2020). The figure of the single woman is also rendered invisible or incoherent within the media texts when *she* fails to repeat postfeminist ideals of femininity as independent and agentic. Defined by ‘lack’ or absence, her incoherence as a subject reinscribes the feminine coupled norm. Yet her ‘failure’ to sustain the ideal postfeminist feminine subject and her deviant liminality, opens up spaces in the media texts where the gender binary is troubled – at least momentarily – in more transformative ways. To explore these ‘cracks’ I draw upon Kathryn Rowe’s theorisation of the ‘unruly woman’ to argue

that the single woman's pathologized positioning at the boundaries of feminine subjectivity concurrently abjectifies her *and* allows her to potentially transform feminine subjectivity by harnessing the power of her spectacular visibility (Rowe, 1995). (See Chapter 7.2.3.2 below)

The interview accounts reveal the strong affective resonance that the 'failure' of the single subject has on single women within their lived experience. Moments of silencing deeply stigmatise the women I interviewed, a stigmatization that was strongly intersected with age and temporality. The women's narratives also exposed their deep discomfort over the invisibility and incoherence of single feminine subjectivities in the cultural realm *and* their own lived experience. Their accounts demonstrate an ambivalent identification and *dis*identification with the abjected figure of the single woman. As Butler states, abjection is: 'an identification which must be disavowed, an identification that one fears to make only because one has *already* made it' (Butler, 2011, p. 74). Thus, what is denied is affirmed: identifying with the abject is too painful, so it is rejected, but in rejection, it is necessarily recognised and sustained. In their response to such 'failures', the single women I spoke to were caught between a continual, conflicting desire to be recognised as single subjects, and a desire to disidentify with, or reject, an abjectified single positioning, resulting in great psychic tension.

However, 'failure' is also understood here, 'as a process of unbecoming' (Halberstam, 2011, p. 23), which may productively offer up 'more creative, surprising ways of being in the world' that challenge conventional notions of success (Banet-Weiser, Gill, & Rottenberg, 2019). My interviewees revealed how they re-establish proximity to conventional forms of coupled femininity through their fantasies *but also* develop and invest in more diverse fantasies of what constitutes 'success' within intimate life which trouble heterosexually coupled femininity and decentre romantic love.

In what follows I first examine how the single woman is produced within cultural representations as 'unspeakable' through processes of silencing. I then discuss how she is made 'unsymbolisable' and 'illegible' through her invisibility and incoherence as a subject. I go on to discuss how the single woman disrupts the boundaries of femininity *through* her abjectified positioning. In the second part of the chapter, I explore how the single women I spoke to negotiate such processes of silencing and invisibility, both in their everyday experiences and the media, often experiencing this in ways which threatens their sense of self and recognition as subjects. Finally, applying Butler's theory of gender performativity (see Chapter 3.3), I explore where such 'failures' produced opportunities for reconfiguration and transformation of gender norms within intimate life.

## **7.2 Media representations**

While in the first two empirical chapters I have drawn upon multiple examples from across the media texts, in this chapter I am more selective and explore fewer examples in depth. This is partly due to

what I argue is the absence of the single woman in popular cultural texts as a whole, as *part* of her broader cultural obscuration and production as ‘unsymbolisable’. As Taylor notes, while representations of the single woman have increased within postfeminist culture over the past two decades, it remains that ‘being partnered remains crucial to women’s ability to become viable and visible’ subjects (Taylor, 2012, p. 3). Thus there are less opportunities to identify ways in which the single woman is not shown in media representations – an issue which was raised again by the women I spoke to.

### 7.2.1 ‘Unspeakable’ subjects: The silenced single woman

The single woman is constructed within the media texts through abjectifying processes of silencing, which produce her as an ‘unspeakable’ subject (Butler, 2011). In such moments of failure, she is seen both self-silencing, or being silenced by others, working to erase her as a viable subject (See also Chapter 6.2.2.3 for discussion of silencing as regulation). In the US TV show *Fargo*, (See Chapter 4.2.2) the detective Molly is a key example. She is continually dismissed by her senior colleagues who interrupt her and refuse to listen to her speak and inhibiting her ability to do her job. The following scene is a key example. Her boss Bill has taken her off the main murder case and demoted her to a smaller case. She quietly disobeys him to meet with a key suspect. When she tries to present the incisive evidence she has gathered, Bill cuts her off repeatedly:

Bill: I told you, don’t pester the guy... I said he’s not a... And then what do you...?

Molly: [Purses lips, shakes head] I never said he was...

Bill: And then what do you do? The next day, even?

Molly: Yeah, but, I mean, what if he is involved, you know? I mean, think about it...

Bill: No! The guy just lost his wife, and you’re boxin’ his ears.

Molly: Yeah, I know, but... Yeah....

Bill: Solve the naked guy. That’s the case I gave you.

Molly: I...

Bill: If this is your suspect, put out an APB and we’ll get him in.

Molly: Sure, but, you know, what if he and Lester are... [Bill turns his back to her. Molly leaves the room].

Molly does not challenge his interruptions, merely purses her lips and furrows her brow, lets her sentences trail off, and she makes placating statements. She stays silent, allowing Bill to continue to dismiss her, obscuring her contribution and eventually her presence. Yet she also clenches her fists in a silent sign of her frustration and deep annoyance at his dismissal, betraying her distress. At the end of the scene, Bill turns his back on her, and she is made to disappear by leaving the room; forced out by his silencing. Throughout the show Molly is shown to be more competent than her all of predominantly male colleagues and her expertise challenges their superiority, but such silencing also constructs her as

passive. This silencing, both by the self and by others, thus reinforces the single women's abjectified positioning, and sublimates her resistance and anger at her stigmatisation, working to sustain the gender hierarchy (McRobbie, 2007). However, when Molly later becomes coupled, and then pregnant, her colleagues finally listen to her evidence. She is eventually recognised as a subject, being acknowledged through promotion to chief. It is only while she is an agentic, independent single who troubles the feminine norm, that she is abjectly constructed as a threat not only to those around her but to the gender hierarchy (See Chapter 5.2.2).

### **7.2.2 'Illegible' subjects: the invisible and incoherent single woman**

Not only is the single woman abjectified through her *silencing*, the media texts also reveal that she is abjectly produced as an 'illegible' subject. These processes of 'illegibility' operated in two ways: as invisibility; and, where she did emerge, incoherence. Thus, while the single woman was often absent from cultural representations overall, marking her invisibility or 'unsymbolisability' (see also Chapter 7.3.2 below), where she *did* appear, she was often produced in ways which were deeply incoherent and unstable. A desire for coherence is something which Butler argues is inherent within subjectivity formation (Butler, 1990, p. 185), with invisibility and incoherence part of a process of abjectionification (Butler, 1993, p190). Yet while she is abjectified through such processes, her very illegibility opens up spaces of contestation which allow for a reconfiguration of the feminine norm and a challenging of the heterosexual matrix.

#### **7.2.2.1 Invisibility**

The single woman is erased as a subject during certain social encounters. For example, she is defined only through her absence in the *Elle* magazine article '10 Women on Being Relentlessly Single Shamed by Their Parents', as shown by one woman, Lexy, age 21 from Florida. Lexy tells of her family's Christmas ritual where her siblings decorate a gingerbread house together with their partners. The fact that she is single means she is unable to take part. When she does *try* to take part, their hurtful comments lead her to withdraw, subjecting her to abjectifying processes of erasure. She feels invisible and excluded from the family unit, marking her as 'odd', out of place, and unrecognised as a (single) subject. Thus her single status not only erases her as a subject, but also eclipses her other familial identities of daughter or sister.

She also describes being forced to leave the family's Christmas dinner, due to the shame that she experiences as a result of her continued stigmatisation: 'The remarks started flying while at my parent's house for dinner. The embarrassment of being examined so closely by all these people was too much for me to handle and I broke down... I had to go outside.' I follow Goffman's understanding of shame as 'the possession of an attribute which is less desirable,' where one is 'reduced from a "usual" person to a tainted one' (Goffman, 1963, p. 12). Thus Lexy, because of her status as a single subject is erased,

forced to eject herself from the gathering due to her possession of the 'shameful' attribute of being single. Lexy is reduced from the 'usual' family member who has a partner, shamefully and painfully excluded from the family traditions which reinforce the coupled norm. The single subject *disappears* – or fails – when she fails to normatively couple. This produces her as deeply unstable and at continual risk of disappearing as a subject.

#### **7.2.2.2 Incoherence**

The single woman is constructed as an 'incoherent' figure within the media representations when she fails to conform to the feminine norm. The character of Frances in the film *Frances Ha* is an example of the single woman being defined through what she 'lacks', as a 'deficit' identity constructed only through what she is *not* (Reynolds & Taylor, 2005). Yet this produces an unstable, contradictory femininity, which at times blurs the gender binary more radically. Despite largely conforming to norms of feminine beauty, being young, white, blond and slim, Frances is often masculinized in unattractive, abjectifying ways. Her friend Benji tells her she has 'a weird man walk' and she frequently describes herself as being 'too tall' to marry – height being a physical characteristic associated with masculinity. She also engages in riskily masculinised behaviour, such as getting drunk and urinating on subway tracks, frequently play-fighting and having blazing, violent rows with Sophie. This representation, in linking singledom to masculinity, resecures coupledness to femininity, and constructs singledom as a threat to the gender binary.

Throughout the film, Benji repeatedly abjectly refers to Frances as being 'undateable' – defining her only through what she is *not*, through what she lacks (the ability to couple) in a derogatory, abjectifying way which blurs her as a viable subject. But rather than 'undateable' *always* being constructed as unattractive or exclusionary – a negative attribute to be avoided – on closer analysis often constructs this positioning as being a positive, almost aspirational state. Sara Ahmed has discussed, in reference to race, being defined by what you are not: 'If to be human is to be white, then to be "not white" is to inhabit the negative: it is to be not,' (Ahmed, 2007, p. 161). Yet while Ahmed describes this as a discomfiting experience, she argues is not always unproductive, and can open up new ways of seeing: 'The feeling of being not white ... disorients how things are arranged. This does not always feel negative,' (Ahmed, 2007, p. 163). We see this in the following scene, where Frances responds to Benji's question about whether she has recently engaged in casual sex: 'Benji: Who were you fucking last week, Frances? Frances: I make love. Benji: Frances: undateable'. Thus, Frances avoids being more negatively positioned as promiscuous *or* cold, and redefines her singledom in different terms which subvert these historical tropes (see Chapter 2). She reorients casual sexual acts away from deviant connotations, and repositions them more positively, suggesting that for her these acts constitute a more 'open' form of love and intimacy.

As the film progresses, Frances begins to call herself undateable, redeploying the abjectifying term. Rather than men not *wanting* her, as the term might suggest, Frances describes herself in a later scene as likely to become a spinster and ‘undateable’ because *they* ‘can’t handle her’. She positions her undateability in a humorous, positive way, caused by men’s inadequacy not hers. Frances later calls herself ‘undateable’ because she wants to educate herself through reading literature and learning a language before she travels: ‘Frances: I have so much to do. I think I’ll probably read Proust...I should probably learn French first... and then read it in French. Undateable.’ Her undateable status is one of a liberatory transgression *above* the coupled norm. Through her ‘queer pessimism’ she reorganises how things – in this case intimate life – are arranged (Ahmed, 2010, p. 162). In a similar scene Benji calls her undateable when she makes an obscure literary reference to Virginia Woolf. Rather than rendering her undesirable, both moments desirably highlight her intelligence and knowledge.

At the end of the film we learn that it is Frances’s very ‘undateability’ which Benji finds attractive as he tries to win her over by describing himself as equally undateable, using the term not only to connect with her, but to ask if she is ‘available’. This contradictory, incoherent, identity produces her as desirable *because of* her supposed inability to couple. She does not respond to his question, leaving it open-ended, as a possibility which is not foreclosed but not pursued either. This ending subverts the typically more closed narrative of the film genre and the conventions of romantic comedy where a heteronormative coupling usually occurs (Fiske, 2010). Thus we can see here that rather than striving to be dateable, Frances instead disorients and de-centers the regulatory structures of intimate life. She places herself as outside or above the realms of convention by happily and willingly self-identifying as the abject state of being undateable.

### **7.2.3 Transforming the boundaries of femininity**

#### **7.2.3.1 The deviant subject: disruption *through* abjection**

The single female subject has historically been abjectified through associations with deviancy, including violence and criminality (Willey, 2014). Yet it is through deviancy, and her subsequent positioning at the limits of femininity, that she at times radically disrupts the feminine norm, opening up space for transformation *through* her very abjection. As discussed in Chapter 5, the single female detective is a particularly troublesome figure, who has long been masculinised by her cold, emotionless disposition (Klein, 1988, p. 10). While she has become commonplace within primetime television crime series, she continues to be associated with pathologizing, abjectifying tropes of deviancy which threaten her femininity. Yet I argue her liminality allows her to trouble these boundaries in transformative, liberatory ways and reconfigure normative constructions of feminine subjectivity.

The character of Saga, in *The Bridge*, demonstrates this well. Saga, who is also linked to pathologizing discourses of ASD (See Chapter 5.2.2), harks back to masculinised tropes of earlier constructions of the

female detective, but transforms them through an entwinement with deviance (Brunsdon, 2013). Throughout Series One, Saga commits several acts of extreme violence, through which she makes significant advances in her cases and troubles the gender binary. Each act advances her career, rendering her deviance empowering – albeit only within the professional sphere – yet her violence is intertwined with feminised vulnerability. In the penultimate episode of S1, she figures out the killer’s true motivation at the same moment she realises she has been left unguarded and unarmed in her colleague Martin’s house. Despite the risk, in eerie silence, Saga ventures outside to pick up her gun and is shot by the killer. Thus her deviant, unruly behaviour is immediately penalized for being ‘too masculine’ and she is left physically vulnerable. While she is taken to hospital, she defiantly discharges herself, still bleeding, clutching her arm and in visible pain. She nevertheless manages to resolve the case through a three-way shoot out in the final episode, reaching the pinnacle of her career.

Her extreme, ‘masculinised’, violence is rewarded by her solving the case, which renders it empowering and breaks with normative ideals of feminine subjectivity as nonviolent. But such success is limited to the professional sphere, and foregrounds a postfeminist, individualised form of success. It also obscures the fact that her empowerment is immediately tempered by her wounding, which realigns her with a feminised vulnerability and repositions single femininity as an abject, dangerous state.

### **7.2.3.2 The unruly single woman: ambivalent transformations**

While the detective provides an example of a liminal figure who troubles the norms of femininity through her deviance, I suggest that the ‘unruly woman’ is more disruptively – yet ambivalently – deviant. Kathryn Rowe’s theorisation of the ‘unruly woman’ argues that she derives *power* from the fact that she is so close to the boundaries of femininity (Rowe, 1995). Not only does comedy as a genre offer the potential for liberatory and transformative constructions of femininity, Rowe argues that this transformative potential is most powerfully concentrated in the ‘unruly woman’, who creates disorder by dominating men; her body is excessive or fat; her speech is excessive; she is possibly androgenous; ...[a] masculinised crone; [she] is associated with ... whoreishness; and with dirt and liminality (Rowe, 1995, p. 31). In the romantic comedy, *HTBS*, (see Chapter 4.2.2) Alice’s friend Robin is symbolic of an ‘unruly woman’ who is ambivalently abjectified through her excessiveness, and dominant – at times hedonistic – behaviour and embodiment in transformative ways.

Both Robin’s body and speech are spectacular through their ‘excessiveness’ – her body is much larger than average, and she comedically breaks the rules of feminine ‘divine composure’ (Rowe, 1995, p. 31) in her bold movements – she is seen striding through Manhattan, rolling out of taxis, tumbling out of bed and clambering from behind sofas. This excessiveness is extended to her behaviour, which is portrayed as promiscuous and hedonistic, and transgresses norms of heterosexuality and monogamy, suggesting that she sleeps with women and has threesomes. Her speech is outrageous – she describes



how she ‘used a man’s dick as a scarf in winter’. She is dominant in her sexual encounters with men, subverting sexual gender hierarchies by, for example, slapping a stranger on the bottom as she walks past him. Building on Rowe’s assertion that visual power flows in multiple directions and that women, ‘may claim the power of making a spectacle of ourselves,’ (Rowe, 1995, p. 12), Robin’s excess thus reverses male sexual dominance and the male gaze.

She lacks shame over her multiple sexual encounters, excessive drinking and raucousness – traits which remain pathologised for normative femininity (Dobson, 2014) – and instead delights in them. Rowe argues that it is when the unruly woman lays claim to her *own* desires that she becomes most transformatory (Rowe, 1995). Robin successfully harnesses the power of her visibility and liminality to return the male gaze and claim her sexual pleasure. Robin’s uninhibited sexual freedom and expression of desire challenges gendered norms of sexual behaviour in transgressive ways. In one scene Robin describes how, for her, Christmas is about sex and she joyfully prioritises a sexual encounter with two men over accompanying Alice in her favourite Christmas ritual, who goes alone, looking sad and lonely. Rowe argues that the tropes of unruliness are ‘a source of potential power *especially* when they are used to expose what composure conceals,’ (Rowe, 1995, p. 31). Robin’s unruliness is placed in relational juxtaposition to Alice’s self-composure in ways which expose its limitations.

Yet while the unruly woman is ‘a ‘topos’ of outrageousness and transgression’, she is also one of instability and ambivalence, ‘evoking delight and unease’ (Rowe, 1995, p. 30) and there is a strong ambivalence around Robin. While she unsettles ideals of feminine perfection she continues to be linked to pathologizing traits. When she is at work, she does not show professionalism, and exhibits unruly behaviour such as sexual indiscretions, laziness and deviancy (traits often linked to fatness in stigmatising ways (Skeggs, 2013, p. 102)). For example, she describes having sexual encounters with security staff in the meeting rooms. In one scene she is three hours late because she has been out the night before, and drinks on the way to the office. Her low-cut tight-fitting black leather clothes are inappropriate for her job at a law firm. Her behaviour at work is however presented as being more *hedonistic*, rather than deviant, and at no point is she disciplined for her transgressions.

Robin also elicits feelings of disgust and contamination in her unruliness. When she sleeps over at Alice’s sister’s house she mistakes her ‘zen garden’ for a cat’s litter tray, which she uses as a toilet, associating her with stigmatised, feminised lower bodily processes (Rowe, 1995). The first time she meets Alice at work they can’t shake hands because Robin’s are covered in hand lotion. She is linked to risky, deviant behaviour, testing positive for drugs. In line with historical tropes of single femininity, Robin is mentally unstable and chaotic, frequently forgetting who she has slept with that evening, or waking up unsure of where she is. As with the detective, she has masculinised, violent tendencies: waking up in a stranger’s house after a one night stand she grabs a knife and tries to attack him in confusion, and she punches

Alice when she disobeys her instructions. Yet, as Rowe notes, angry women are misogynistically constructed as dangerous because they deeply unsettle ideologies of gender (Rowe, 1995). At the end of the film Robin is revealed to be rich and highly educated; thus her racial and class privilege are perhaps what *allow* her to transgress the norms of femininity.

As an ambivalent, liminal figure Robin is able to subvert traits which are usually pathologized for women, unsettle ideas of feminine perfection, and harness her spectacular visibility and sexual desires to challenge gendered (hetero)sexual hierarchies in transgressive ways. Yet Robin is ambivalently presented as more grotesque than desirable, and is contained through discourses of mental instability and associations with contamination, which do not overturn misogynistic, abjectifying norms but nevertheless unsettle gendered ideologies. Thus, the single woman in certain moments *uses* her liminal, abjectifying position in ways which – while still often curtailed to the professional sphere or tempered by deep ambivalence – reconfigure processes of abjection to more transformative ends.

### **7.3 Single women's narratives**

While the single woman was abjected in the media representations, the interview data highlighted the multiple, complex ways in which this process was experienced by single women, and the significant consequences that the 'failure' of the single subject had on their understandings of intimate life and feminine subjectivity. In this section I examine how the women I spoke to experienced processes of silencing and invisibility as a form of abjection which threatened their sense of 'self' and recognition as feminine subjects. In their negotiation of media representations, they both identified and disidentified with them as a way of gaining coherence and legibility as a subject. But this also exposed the deep tensions produced by such a threatening of their feminine subjectivity. Finally, applying Butler's theory of gender performativity (See Chapter 3.3), I argue that such 'failures' offered opportunities for reconfiguration and transformation of gender norms by opening up spaces to invest in more radical fantasies of single femininity.

#### **7.3.1 Unspeakable subjects: silencing the single woman**

As discussed in Chapter 6, interviewees told of a pervasive silencing around the subject of their singledom which occurred both through self-silencing, and intersubjectively through others' silence. Whereas in Chapter 6 I examined how silencing worked to regulate women, here I show how silences abjected them. Silencing is understood here as an emotional defence produced in *response* to stigmatising feelings of shame (Jimenez & Walkerdine, 2011). Stigma is defined by Goffman as occurring where 'one holds an attribute that makes one different from others in the category of persons available for one to be, of a less desirable... discrediting kind,' (Goffman, 1963, p. 12). Goffman argues that shame arises from the individual's perception that 'he [sic] possesses such an attribute which is stigmatised at the societal level' – in this case lack of a romantic partner (Goffman, 1963, p12). Tyler, building on

Goffman, suggests that stigma includes but operates *beyond* the individual psychological level. I build on her argument that it also operates structurally at the social, economic and political level, which is nevertheless experienced intimately (Tyler, 2020, pp. 9, 17). The women's accounts therefore illuminate how the structural privileging of coupledness was experienced affectively as stigmatising *through* silence. Few of the women I asked could say what was left unsaid or articulate what occurred in such silences. Yet many told me of a strong affective resonance, with several of the women saying the absence of conversation around the subject of their singledom produced feelings of huge discomfort. Such silences therefore worked as an operation of power to position them abjectly (Lai et al., 2015), to form the constitutive boundary of the feminine subject (Butler, 2011).

### **7.3.1.1 Self-silencing**

There was evidence of self-silencing around the topic of singledom by several women. As elaborated on in Chapter 6.3.2.2, self-silencing operated in two ways: as inhibition, produced by a feeling that they were not being heard, as a sense that they were not able to speak due to *other's* judgement; and as intentional, as a deliberate desire not to want to speak (Carpenter & Austin, 2007). Caroline is a key example of this. Caroline is a 50-year-old black, middle class woman, who has always lived in London and been single for three years, with her last relationship lasting a year. Overall she describes herself as having spent most of her life single. She said that until recently she experienced her singledom as so abjectly stigmatising, untenable and uncomfortable, that she was unable to speak to anyone about it:

Caroline: I think that up until 40 I felt very, very negatively. I saw it as a erm a comment on my loveability very much, so I was humiliated by being single and unmarried by 40, errr I really thought that I was very soiled goods.... I wonder if I was in a bad place or if you'd met me a year ago ... I might have said no [to the interview], I might have felt a bit embarrassed and I wouldn't have wanted to discuss it.

Caroline describes her own self-judgement as being the main reason for her silence and in doing so her self-silencing works to obscure her single subjectivity entirely. By seeing herself as 'soiled goods' and as 'unlovable', she abjectly positions herself as a failed, aging, non-subject who not only doesn't seek acknowledgement as a subject but doesn't *deserve* to be acknowledged. It is notable that many interviewees who were approached for interview similarly said that they did not wish to talk about the subject and therefore self-silenced completely (See Chapter 4.2.5), echoing the broader process of silencing identified within the lack of media representations of the single woman.

### **7.3.1.2 Intersubjective silencing**

Silencing predominantly operated *intersubjectively* to abjectify the single subject – through silences in conversation, or the absence of conversation. There was evidence of significant silencing around the

topic of singledom in relationship to parents and close family members – particularly mothers. When their singledom *was* discussed by others it was often in vague or brief statements. It is notable that intersubjective silencing featured more prominently than in the media representations, which depicted a more individualised construction of singledom, obscuring the intersubjective formation – or failure – of subjectivity. The relationship to such silencing was complex, and while the women frequently described how *glad* they were not to have others bring up the subject of their singledom, they also sometimes expressed upset that it was avoided, particularly when it came to friends (See also Chapter 6.3.2.3). I argue that they sought, through others' recognition, an affirmation of their legibility as a subject. By not having their status as a single subject affirmed intersubjectively, their subjectivity as a gendered single subject 'fails' and is rendered illegible, causing confusion and distress, as Joan articulates in the following passage. Joan is a black, 47-year-old heterosexual, working class woman, who has always lived in London and says she has been single for all of her life. She particularly notices such silences when she brings the topic up with friends who have children:

Joan: When I talk about it with the people who have got children ... they don't seem to know how to respond. They have this look on their faces as if they don't know what to say. Erm, which can cause me to think what's going on with them?... I feel kind of like 'oh' several things I feel like first of all a bit confused. Second of all I think oh maybe they don't know what to respond, then I think oh but they're very nice people so therefore they must care, but they just don't know what to say. They don't know what to say. Or maybe they have something to say but they, but it's always the same kind of a kind of looking at you... but not saying anything... They don't even do a lighthearted: 'Do you know what you will find something, or someone'... It's almost like a gap. But I, it could be a characteristic of their personality... and then I have to look at myself, there are times when I don't know what to say.

Joan struggled to describe both what her friends might *mean* by such silence, facial expressions, or 'looking', and her affective response to them. She insisted they are 'nice people who must care', which suggests their silence makes her feel uncared for. In these moments of silence, the single feminine subject is produced as unspeakable. Joan seeks in others' recognition, an affirmation of her legibility as a subject. By not having her status as a single subject affirmed, her status as a gendered subject fails and is rendered illegible, causing distress. Joan expresses what Butler describes as a fantasmatic *desire for* a coherent identification or 'stable' gender identity, foundational to the performative construction of gender (Butler, 1997). She wants friends to reassure her that she will find someone, not only to confirm her as a subject, but to confirm that she will move from her position as single to a stable (coupled) subject. Yet this is thwarted by her friends' failure to speak, which produces a psychic dissonance, or as Joan describes it 'confusion'. Instead Joan remains in an abjectified positioning, yet it is a positioning she struggles with and tries to disavow (Butler, 2011). Rather than dwell on this struggle, Joan minimises and makes sense

of it by describing her friends' reactions as part of their personalities absolving them of responsibility. She turns her surveilling gaze inward, blaming herself for being *equally* silent.

These tensions were significantly intersected by temporality. Sam, aged 36, thought others' silence on the subject of her singledom was increasing with age, and she experienced this as *increasingly* abjectifying. Sam is a white middle-class heterosexual woman who has lived in London for 11 years. She says she has spent around half of her adult life as single, but in the past seven years has had two significant relationships. The last one, which lasted three years ended traumatically nine months ago. As with Joan, Sam highlighted how friends with families were likely to remain silent, but experienced this as increasing distressing as time passed:

Sam: 'I've got to an age now where it's very difficult to talk about with... friends who are in relationships or have families ... they don't know what to say. ... I honestly believe that they believe that it is too late now and so they don't want to have that conversation. ... I think a lot of people, like, my, some, particular aunts and uncles who used to ask me, now don't because it's the 'oh well it's a bit late now isn't it?'.... I've got to the point where it's not a conversation anymore and it's an assumption. Which is terrifying.'

Goffman defines stigma as the result of failing to realise a particular norm (Goffman, 1963) – while Sam hasn't fulfilled the feminine norm of coupling and having children by a certain age, she experiences silencing from those who have fulfilled this norm as *doubly* abjectifying. Sam describes how such a silence temporally positions her as now having 'missed' her chance and as being 'too late' for coupledness, and she is painfully caught within what Lahad and Hazan call a triple disenfranchisement of singledom, age and gender (Lahad & Hazan, 2014). Drawing upon historical tropes of the old maid, Sam is distressed at having to occupy the untenable or as she describes her 'terrifying' position of being an 'aging' single woman, constructing it as a deeply shameful set of attributes (Goffman, 1963).

While there was a sense from interviewees that they would sometimes like friends or distant family members to raise the topic of their singledom and recognise them as 'subjects', this desire was mainly absent when it came to *close* family members. Thus with parents – especially mothers – singledom became such a deeply abject, untenable status that they sought to *disidentify* with it. Many women therefore said they felt very fortunate *not* to be asked by close family about it. Yet in doing so they not only tried to position themselves in a less abjectified way – which Goffman has termed 'covering' (Goffman, 1963, p. 125) – they still constructed such comments as highly stigmatising.

Instead of being raised directly, interviewees' parents almost exclusively addressed the subject *indirectly* through discourses of happiness<sup>47</sup>. Anna is a 36-year-old middle class woman who identifies as queer. She has been single for most of her life, with one serious relationship ending when she was 20, and a few casual sexual relationships since then. Anna describes her relationship to her mother as extremely close. Yet when asked what her parents thought of her single status, she said it was rarely discussed. Instead it was addressed indirectly through discourses of 'happiness'. Anna echoed several of the interviewees when she said her mother didn't ask her about it:

Anna: I think she would like me to meet someone but that's more her wanting me to be happy and as long as I tell her I'm happy then she just, she never digs deeper.

As Ahmed argues, such an apparently 'freeing' statement that someone just wants you to be happy can still be highly regulatory in its effects: 'If my happiness is dependent on your happiness then ... You have a duty to be happy for me,' (Ahmed, 2010, p. 91). Thus, the imperative to be happy becomes doubled, not only must Anna be happy, she must also be happy in order to ensure her mother's happiness. Yet happiness for her mother is still orientated towards Anna becoming a coupled subject, eclipsing her as a single subject. Indeed, the need to insist that she *is* happy presupposes that she – being single – must not be.

However, Jennifer employed the discourse of happiness the other way around, when discussing her mother. Jennifer is a 33-year-old white middle class heterosexual woman who has had one relationship, lasting a few months, in her mid-20s. Jennifer has a very close relationship with her mother, and, like many, she framed her mother no longer mentioning the topic as 'lucky'. But an emotional moment in the interview, she suddenly broke down in tears, saying that while *she* was not herself unhappy being single, she was deeply upset by her belief that this would make her mother (and grandmother) unhappy:

Jennifer: Mum, luckily, has pretty much stopped that now. So that's good. Erm, but I think even my gran would say 'oh is there anyone special'? And you're like oh god I don't want to like upset her either... Sometimes it makes me sad for my mum because... I might get sad, erm, like my brother's just had a baby [trying not to cry], his wife, and it makes me a bit sad that it's not me, yeah. [Starts to cry] But no, no, no, not that it's not me that's not having a baby, sad for my mum, that's not... because it's not her daughter or something. But that would be the only thing. But it's not, I'm not sad, I'm sad because I think she might be sad. But she's not cause she loves my sister-in-law so that's fine and the baby's super cute so that's fine. [Laughs while crying]. Because like yeah that's what makes me more upset...

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<sup>47</sup> Gemma, Jane Sam, Diane, Helen and Mandy all said this too.

Once more the imperative to be happy is doubled, not only must Jennifer be happy, she must also be happy to ensure her mother's happiness, which is orientated towards reproductive coupledness (Ahmed, 2010). Thus even while she tries to *resist* the reproductive coupled norm by insisting *she* is happy, she sustains it. The pain which she feels is the result of her erasure as a single subject. Jennifer attempts to distance herself from her sadness by telling me, through her tears, trying to lighten it with laughter, that it is her mother who is sad, and Jennifer is only sad *on her behalf*. But she then contradicted this by concluding that she is upset. Jennifer hesitantly then reflected that while her mother has not said anything, it is something that Jennifer *acutely* senses:

Jennifer: It's not that she says anything in particular, but you just know, that she feels like yeah... Yeah, well no, and maybe she doesn't, I don't know. But I do feel that maybe she would like a grandchild that was born of one of her children.

Jennifer therefore intersubjectively experiences this silence in a deeply abjectifying way. She conveyed to me a painful sense of her having 'failed' to meet gendered expectations, based not only on lack of a partner, but also a gendered, intergenerational failure to consequently become a mother and her obligation to bear a child *as a daughter*. Psychoanalyst and sociologist Nancy Chodorow has argued that feminine subjectivity is established through the interpersonal relationship that women have with their mothers, from whom role learning, including intergenerational expectation of mothering, is established (Chodorow, 1978). While Chodorow has acknowledged that these gendered features of psychic life do not preclude individual variations and are uniquely situated, this is perhaps what makes Jennifer's failure to repeat such activity so upsetting for her (Chodorow, 2012, p. 107). This expectation also occurs in the context of what several have noted is a heightened visibility and celebration of motherhood within postfeminist popular culture, which perhaps reinscribes Jennifer's pain (Negra, 2009; Orgad, 2016).

Fathers were less frequently mentioned than mothers, often placed under the collective of 'parents', yet their silence around the topic also operated in abjectifying ways. Diane is a white 28-year-old bisexual woman who moved from the north of England six months ago. Her last relationship ended 9 months ago and consisted of a couple of dates. When asked whether her father has mentioned her singledom, Diane said he refers to it *indirectly* through her sexuality, once more obscuring her as a single subject: 'I don't think my Dad is very keen on the fact that erm that erm I like girls ... He has said from time to time you know... you won't get a partner if you carry on like that... it's not ladylike.' Diane's father indirectly intersects her singledom with her sexuality *and* gender, to render her doubly abject. He constructs her singledom as a 'problem' which she can only overcome by heterosexually coupling, producing her as a 'failed' feminine subject.

There is a similar obscuration of the subject by Theresa's father, this time through discourses of reproduction. Theresa is a white 50-year-old heterosexual middle-class woman who was brought up in Ireland and has been in London for three years. She describes herself as single 'mostly all of the time', having had one short relationship 15 years ago, and says her last relationship of around 8 months ended 8 years ago. Her father views his daughter as purposeless, as she is not a mother:

Theresa: My Dad thinks I am like, he doesn't quite see the point of me. ... I, I don't really have any purpose in life... Cause ... I don't have a family, don't have kids, he doesn't really see what I'm doing with my life.

Interviewer: What sort of things does he say that makes you, gives you that impression? Or does he say it directly?

Theresa: Oh yes directly! Why are you doing that I don't understand why, why are you, why would you go back to school?

Interviewer: Does he ask you about being single?

Theresa: No. He's no, never, never.

By never mentioning her singledom, and challenging all other aspects of her life, he erases her as a subject. Theresa is, through her father's narrative, defined *only* by what she is not (Addie & Brownlow, 2014). Yet she angrily rejects this positioning, dismissing it as a product of his background: 'He's got a very rural 1950s Irish, .... everything is bound in church doctrine...' While she does not directly mention her feelings about her father's statements, she conveys frustration and anger via her tone, a defiance which she turns back on him: 'Being expert at my job doesn't occur to him because I'm not working in an office. I bring up a child. 'How hard is that?' I'm like well you sucked at it...' Her abjectification is deepened through intersections with class, with her father drawing on classed and gendered divisions to devalue both her professional labour *and* her single childless positioning. Thus while Theresa fails to fulfil her gendered obligations by not mothering a child, she also fails to meet middle class 'professional' aspirations by not performing white-collar labour. While her father's opinion holds weight, she distances herself from it through her anger, in a way which many interviewees found more difficult to do with their mothers.

To summarise, there was significant silencing around the topic of singledom, both by the single women themselves and those around them, which they experienced as erasing them as viable, visible subjects. While they both desired to be recognised, they simultaneously desired *not* to be recognised through what was constructed as an 'object' state. As Tyler argues, 'with each act of desubjectification, comes another attempt at resubjectification', and they were caught between a continual push and pull between both untenable positions (Tyler, 2013, p. 115).



### 7.3.2 The Illegible subject: becoming the invisible, incoherent single woman

#### 7.3.2.1 Invisibility

As discussed in Chapter 6.3.2.1, while many of the women interviewed said they believed there was a shift towards *more* media representations of single women, including increased *diversity* within portrayals of femininity, when asked to identify examples, either fictional or real, the majority could not think of any, confirming Taylor's findings (Taylor, 2012). Most of the women expressed deep affective discomfort when confronted with such an invisibility, which contradicted their belief in, and *desire* for, recognition. It was often a point which was not dwelt on, and was characterised by long silences, representing their unwillingness or inability to address the obscuring of single subjectivities. Demonstrating the 'unsymbolisable' nature of single femininity as a form of abjection, several of the interviewees were concerned and upset by their inability to identify representations in the media. For example, Jane, a 33-year-old heterosexual white woman, who has been single for six years, gave a typical response, punctuating her speech with brief, broken statements, as she struggled to think of anyone or respond to such invisibility, and this was replicated across many accounts:

Jane: 'I think in the media, I don't think ... I still can't think of anyone offhand... Yeah. There's no one who like, spearheading, like there's no one there saying, it's ok to be single like type thing.... [long pause]. No, nothing... Worrying!'

Caroline: I'm racking my brains, is there a politician, a female politician or something or a scientist? [long pause]... No, not really.

Maria: I just think, I can't come up with a good example. I could just invent one!

Eleanor: I don't know if ... Erm, I'll think... a really long time. No, quite a lot of people can't like, quite, not a lot comes to mind I find, so far.

Maria's suggestion of inventing an example showed her strong desire for representation. The women also discussed moments where they were rendered invisible as single subjects intersubjectively by *others* within their daily life, when it was 'assumed' that they were coupled. Two interviewees discussed how they had experienced an eclipsing of their single subjectivity by those around them in such a way. Though Jennifer<sup>48</sup> says that she deliberately never discusses the topic of her singledom at work, she says that her colleagues had assumed that she was in a relationship with her best friend: 'I was like "No no she's married!" .... Like it's fine! [laughing] So that was a bit. Erm so....' Such an encounter is

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<sup>48</sup> Katherine recounted an almost identical account of a colleague assuming that she was coupled and stated that people often did so.

uncomfortable as not only does it initially render her single subjectivity invisible, it *then* also requires her to reassert her abjectified identity as single, something which she had previously refused. It also erases her platonic friendship; eclipsing it through homosexual coupling. Eleanor also says that people often react with incredulity when she tells them she is single because she is so sociable. Eleanor is a 37-year-old white heterosexual woman who has had one serious relationship around 10 years ago and has been single since:

Eleanor: 'One of my friends ... was so, she was really surprised that I wasn't even having like flings this summer Because I'm so sociable... I tell people ... and they're just like 'Really?! How is that possible?'

In such moments her status as a single subject is not only challenged, it's rendered 'impossible'. The binary division between singledom as socially isolated, and coupledness as socially connected are re-established – Eleanor's liminal positioning between these two oppositions renders her untenable and invisible as a subject.

Once more, intersections with age were fundamental to what was perceived as the increasing invisibility of their single subjectivity. Maria is white, middle class, 42-year-old woman who moved to London five years ago from Europe. Maria discusses how since she has moved to the UK from her hometown she has become 'invisible' as a subject, but she also entwines this with her age:

Maria: Maybe I was younger... I was feeling more comfortable in the environment [in Europe]... I say since I came to the UK, I've become transparent. Men don't see me anymore... there are so many good-looking women...

Maria reduces her single subjectivity to sexual attractiveness, made visible only through the male heterosexual gaze, for which she competes with other women. Interestingly many of the interviewees conversely described London as providing them with a *desired* invisibility, what Goffman terms 'covering' (Goffman, 1963, p. 125) where the stigmatised attribute is hidden from others. London was frequently constructed by the interviewees a place where there was diversity within relationship patterns and less cultural pressure to conform to the coupled norm, rendering their singledom less conspicuous and therefore less marginalised.

### **7.3.2.2 Incoherence**

In this context of 'invisibility' or 'obscuration' of constructions of single femininity at the cultural level, the interviewees expressed a *desire* for coherence and stability as single subjects. Yet the participants' *own* accounts were often highly conflicted and contradictory, lacking in stability. In these moments their status as a single subject failed, and they experienced a significant amount of psychic tension. Anna

throughout her interview constructs herself in a highly contradictory way as being *both* independent and as socially connected (See Chapter 5.3.1). Yet at times the pressure of connecting both of these two oppositional positionings fails, and in a moving account she told me of a time she broke down after a wedding:

Anna: ‘It was two days after the wedding... and I just went to the loo and then I just had an overwhelming sense of horrible sadness and collapsed crying on the side of the bathtub and I was in there for so long that my friend came in and he ... put an arm around me and he said what you know ‘what’s wrong?’ and I just like “I just really want someone, I just really want someone to hug me.” ... I think also cause everyone at this wedding, this whole thing... pretty much that I knew anyway... was in a solid relationship and I think I just felt really alone and a bit lone, erm, lonely. And I’d said this to him, I said, you know, I, you know I said I feel really alone. And he’s said, “but you’re not alone, I’m here” and I said, no but I feel lonely.’

After being surrounded by couples while also engaging in a ritual which celebrates and institutionalises the couple, obscuring the single subject, her erasure and failure to conform to the coupled norm overwhelms Anna and she experiences a full breakdown in her sense of self. Yet she only hesitantly admits to feelings of abjection and isolation, stressing the support of her friend. Quickly working to cover her distress, Anna then told me such instances only occur ‘occasionally’, ‘not even twice yearly’. Such a move demonstrates that while she experiences her framing outside the normative institutions of intimacy as acutely painful it takes significant emotional effort to minimise and cope with such abjectionification (Berlant, 2008).

A similar loss of self was expressed by Monica, 32. Originally from Eastern Europe and working class, she has been single for five years, having come out of a 9-year relationship, the ending of which she describes as very traumatic as she became very ‘dependent’ on him. Monica describes a sense of discomfort at having now become ‘too’ individual, and believes her success as a single subject risks constructing her as a failed gendered subject:

‘I became too individual...and I don’t need any man you know, I’ve got my finances, I’ve got my life, but then I can’t, I should stop thinking this way. Because I will end up on my own... Sometimes I ask men you know ... could you do that ... I feel ... more... feminine, but it may be that femininity side is gone!’

Monica appropriates those discourses identified in *Frances Ha* of independent single femininity as deviantly masculine, but unlike Frances, she experiences this as very distressing. She is upset at the idea she has ‘masculinized’, and anxiously tries to regain her femininity by asking for help, reinscribing

heteronormative femininity as dependent. In contrast to Alice in *HTBS* and Ana in *Elle Magazine* who fear a loss of self through *coupling* (see Chapter 6.2.1), Monica worries about the loss of her feminine self through singledom, either way, both construct her single subjectivity as unstable and fragile.

Interviewees also discussed how they *disidentified* with what they perceived as abjectified representations of single femininity. But as Butler states, abjection is intimately tied up with subconscious processes of identification *and* disavowal: ‘abjection can only take place ... through an identification with that abjection, an identification which must be disavowed’ (Butler, 2011, p. 74). and processes of both identification and disidentification occurred. When representations *were* cited, they were often described as failing to represent the complexity of lived experienced, reducing single femininity to tropes. Katherine was one of the few to think of one:

Katherine: ‘Yeah we probably are more absent than... even more recently where there’ve been things like *Fleabag* where they’re kind of like ‘oh look this is a much more kind of realistic portrayal of you know a modern woman’ it’s still um it’s not really positive is it? Like the idea is that she’s ‘oh you know she’s a bit crazy, isn’t she?’

While Katherine relates to ‘*Fleabag*’s realism’, suggesting that it portrays singledom in a more progressive way, she *also* disidentifies with its reduction of singledom to abjectifying tropes of insanity.<sup>49</sup> Yet, following Butler, by evoking *Fleabag* as crazy in order to disidentify with her, she reaffirms this identification.

This process of disidentification with the abject worked in multiple, often ambivalent ways, at times rejecting the coupled norm and revaluing singledom and at times reinscribing the coupled norm. Such ambivalence is demonstrated by Erin. Erin is a 47-year-old heterosexual woman who has a successful career in the City and who describes her relationship history as ‘mixed’, with nothing longer than a year and no live-in relationship. She mentioned a celebrity figure who is often negatively constructed through singledom:

Erin: I was reading [about] Jennifer Aniston ... I think she is always painted as a slightly tragic figure and to my horror I find myself ... thinking ‘oh that’s so sad’ and then I think, ‘that’s me!’ And I would be outraged if someone was describing me in the way that she’s described... as lacking and having lost in some way.

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<sup>49</sup> See Chapter 1 for a discussion of *Fleabag*.

As Butler argues, ‘certain identifications are made *in order* to ... institute a *dis*identification with a position that seems too saturated with injury or aggression... occupiable only through imagining the loss of a viable identity altogether,’ (Butler, 2011, p. 64). In order to avoid the loss of herself as a viable subject, Erin rejects an identification with the ‘pitiable’ ageing single woman which Aniston represents for her. Erin is ambivalently caught between such pity and a shocking realisation that she sees herself in it. It is thus an identification that she fears to make ‘because she has already made it,’ (Butler, 2011, p. 112). She concludes by distancing herself from this identification, insisting that she would never allow *herself* to be positioned in this way by others, her deep discomfort, underscored by her use of the word ‘outraged’.

While such disidentification is often unknowable to the subject, operating subconsciously, it is also sometimes externalised and made explicit. Another woman I spoke to, Helen, expressed a radical refusal of single femininity, which nevertheless suggests on some level that she identifies with it (Butler, 2011). Helen is a 41-year-old white, heterosexual, middle-class woman who has spent most of her life single, but has had several relationships of around two years, with her last relationship of 8 months ending two years ago. When asked if she could think of any examples of single women in the media that she could relate to, she got angry and told me she strongly refuses to identify with them, and avoids their representation:

‘I try to do the opposite. I try to model off happily married women who I would rather be. ... I don’t go around looking at single women going ‘that’s what I want to be’ because it’s not who I want to *be*! So I’m like ok that’s nice you go do your single thing, and actually ‘what can I learn from these women who have what I feel like I want?’

Helen here abjectly erases the single woman from her view, instead focusing on the married woman. She re-establishes the boundary of the viable, desirable feminine subject as one who is coupled. Yet her anger denotes the pain that such an unwanted identification produces within her. In an opposite move to Erin, she questions why a celebrity figure who she admires is single<sup>50</sup>.

Helen: I guess Oprah’s single but she kind of disappoints me, makes me feel kind of sad, like why is this amazing woman single? Like, what the fuck is wrong with society? Like she’s amazing, she’s beautiful, ... why is she single?

Helen thus ‘objects to an injury done to another, to deflect attention from an injury done to oneself,’ (Butler, 2011, p. 64) as a way of *displacing* the hurt she herself feels. She is unable to reconcile what she

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<sup>50</sup> While Helen noted that Oprah has a partner, to Helen she is single because they aren’t married.

sees as the oppositional characteristics of Oprah being a desirable, viable subject worthy of validation, with her being ‘disappointingly’ single, and tries to make sense of this by blaming society. Within both statements Helen demonstrates a desire to maintain a close proximity to the conventional love plot which offers her the prospect of social belonging (Berlant, 2008), while she herself painfully falls outside the boundaries of what she constitutes a ‘valid’ subject.

### **7.3.3 Transformations of femininity**

#### **7.3.3.1 Radical ‘unbecomings’ and belongings**

Several interviewees positively referenced mediated examples of ‘failed’ single femininity, in order to make sense of their own lives and articulate their desire for alternative forms of identification and belonging (Berlant, 2008). A key example was Abby, a 30-year-old bisexual South East Asian woman who has been single for four months, having just come out of a 10-year on-and-off relationship. She discusses why she particularly identifies with Oksana from the TV spy thriller *Killing Eve*. While she reinscribes Oksana’s mental instability, she transforms it in aspirational and liberatory ways:

Oksana... is a complete like [whistles] psycho ... but I relate to her because I think she is just a person who wants to find someone ...but she’s also like a ruthless lesbian ... a ruthless killer assassin ... but I like the fact that she’s very powerful, she’s rational she’s not... emotional. ... She goes against the societal norms of what a woman is and should be, but in the process of doing that it makes you a bit crazy and a bit damaged... I can really relate to that.

Indeed, Abby identifies with Oksana precisely *because of* her deviance, rationality, lesbianism and mental instability, *alongside* what she calls her desire for the ‘normal’ pleasures of consumption and coupledness. Yet Abby also likes Oksana as she can relate to going against the feminine norm. When asked to expand, Abby says she has succeeded in a male-dominated sector but has been subject to racialised sexual harassment at work, which drew upon Asian stereotypes of female embodiment. Thus, Abby sustains the independent, rational, successful single career woman as desirable, but incorporates an understanding of mental instability as not only producing Oksana as liminal, but as granting her power to trouble the boundaries of femininity (Rowe, 1995). Like Saga (See Chapter 5.2.2), Oksana’s positioning as unstable, violent, and unemotional is what appeals to Abby as it offers a chance for recognition and belonging outside the feminine norm, both through her professional success and her non-conformation to heterosexual coupledness.

#### **7.3.3.2 Productive failures: alternative visions**

The majority of the women presented the coupled norm as a desirable goal, as what constituted ‘success’ within intimate life, but some constructed alternative visions if such ‘successes’ failed to appear. Several women indicated ambivalence towards their single positioning, which allowed for an attachment to the

conventional norms of romantic love to be held *alongside* a 'failure' to fulfil that norm (Berlant, 2008, p. 2). Failure is understood here 'as a process of unbecoming' which 'allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behaviour' (Halberstam, 2011, p. 11) and may offer 'more creative, surprising ways of being in the world' that challenge conventional notions of success (Banet-Weiser et al., 2019, p. 17). Such ambivalent failures to 'repeat' normative femininity were therefore often productive ones, where space was opened up for alternative relationship formations (Butler, 1990).

While Sharp & Ganong argue that women aged 24-35 feel most pressure to conform to the coupled norm (Sharp & Ganong, 2011, p. 958), I found that those over 40 were more likely to express most dissatisfaction with the idea of remaining single, yet at the same time to have developed a clearer understanding of an alternative future. Erin, 47, is an example of this. While she has always wanted marriage and children, she has adjusted her vision of her future. She is released from the regulatory temporal pressure of normative reproductive femininity, now that she is located outside of it:

Erin: When I was beyond the point of having children in some ways it just took the pressure off .... so at the moment I feel quite comfortable with it but equally I don't want to feel *too* comfortable with it because ... if you ... don't make the effort to meet somebody... you're probably not open to meeting somebody too.

Instead of experiencing this as abjectifying, she positions it as liberating. But she tempers this transformation by not shutting down the possibility of meeting someone by becoming 'too comfortable'. Rather than fully rejecting the coupled norm and presenting a utopian future – as seen in *Frances Ha* – she demonstrates the complexity and difficulty of lived experience which falls somewhere between the two states. While she is relieved at being released from fulfilling the feminine norm of reproduction, she still holds on to the fantasy of coupledness while *also* embracing alternative family formations:

Erin: If I met someone... I'd quite like to think that they had children and ... that is a different way ... I'm very open to different ways... I can't see myself doing what a really good friend of mine is doing which is adopting on her own... I worry about ... would it close the opportunity to have the relationship....

Erin expresses deep ambivalence which holds the disappointment of not being a wife and mother together with a pleasurable continued attachment to the promise of romantic love marking 'a space of disappointment but not disenchantment,' (Berlant, 2008, pp. 2, 11). Erin finds a sense of belonging in her *proximity to*, rather than location within, the status of being coupled (Berlant, 2008). While Erin radically opens herself up to alternative forms of motherhood, she stops short of desiring a *single* motherhood, because she thinks it might prevent future coupling, recentering coupledness and abjectly

erasing single femininity. By foregoing single motherhood to hold out for a relationship, she establishes a relation of cruel optimism: in remaining attached to the promise of coupledness, she perhaps limits her flourishing (Berlant, 2011).

The significant threat of remaining *outside* the normative institutions of intimacy when entering older age, re-emerges in Jennifer's account when she discusses her aunt:

Jennifer: She was having a great time ... one day a man walked up to her in the Waitrose carpark and was like 'I've kind of seen you around and I just wanted to know if you want to go for dinner? And ... now they're married'. But I ... think, that's really nice, because you've done everything you want to do ... you've ... had your career... so, I don't know, I don't think, I'm certainly not making any kind of plans for being 60 but I have also thought about what that might be like, and I guess there is a little of like 'oh god I'm not going to have any children and then who's going to look after me when I probably get dementia?' [chuckles]

While aligning with 'meet-cute' romance narratives (See Chapter 6.2.3.2), Jennifer partially transforms abjectifying tropes of the lonely old maid when she describes her aunt as happy *before* having met her husband. It also revalues *later* coupledness as the ideal – and presents being coupled as something to enjoy in later life, once you have achieved other goals, rather than as the primary goal. But despite these partial transformations, she still idealises coupledness and Jennifer's own positioning here is complex. Jennifer distances herself from her aunt's story by suggesting that she is too young to plan that far ahead, constructing her aunt as the older 'other'. When she does imagine her future, instead of becoming like her aunt, she embodies the old maid stereotype of being socially isolated and lacking support. She tries to minimise the pain caused by the idea of a failure to conform to the coupled norm prefacing it with hesitant statements such as 'I don't know'. Yet there is also a sense that her future is 'unplannable', that this abject outcome is not inevitable, and she transformatively takes advantage of this break with the norm to leave her future open.

However once more it was non-heterosexual women who constructed more radical visions of alternative relationship formations and actively *celebrated* a decentering of the monogamous, romantic coupled norm (Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004). Their double 'failure' to conform to the heterosexual, coupled norm offered space for productive reordering and reconfiguration of intimate life and a transformation of the abjection of single femininity. A key example of this is Anna, 36, who is queer. She told me why non-monogamy is *more* desirable than monogamy to her:

Anna: We don't necessarily see it as a bad thing... We don't see it as promiscuous, and we're not saying, you know that we are shagging someone different every night... but the idea of perhaps being



constrained to one person. Yep. Feels a little bit claustrophobic to us. So the idea that you could be in a sexual relationship but it doesn't necessarily mean it's a... all-in relationship is something that we are ok with ...

By saying that they don't see non-monogamy as 'necessarily bad', Anna constructs her positioning as liminal and monogamy as normative, reaffirming this norm. Anna also uses the collective 'we' – her and her friend – to distance herself from this radical disruption. Yet this failure to conform to the monogamous coupled norm allows her space to escape both from the shame of 'deviant' promiscuity *and* from what she sees as the 'constraining' 'claustrophobic' strictures of a monogamous relationship. While she doesn't foreclose the possibility of, or place herself *outside* the realms of a monogamous 'full' relationship, it is something that she is only 'ok' with, radically constructing this as *less* desirable for her.

#### **7.4 Conclusion: conflicts and reconfigurations**

The single female subject is found to 'fail' in multiple ways across both the cultural representations and lived experience, not only through abjectifying processes which render her invisible, incoherent and unstable as a figure but also through the exclusionary logics of repudiation which produce the normative female subject as heteronormatively, romantically coupled. The single subject is often presented within the media representations as unspeakable, unsymbolisable or invisible, through her silencing, illegibility or erasure in certain moments. Through her production as a deficit 'non-subject', defined only by what she 'lacks', such representations deeply threaten single femininity, reinscribe the feminine norm as coupled and reestablish patriarchal gendered hierarchies.

However such 'failure' at times simultaneously allows the single woman to productively trouble gendered norms, subvert and transform the abjectification of single femininity, decentre romantic love and reconfigure understandings of intimate life, both in the media texts but more substantially within lived experience. I argue that in the media texts it is when the single woman is *most* liminally positioned at the very boundaries of femininity, associated with tropes of deviancy, lack, and spectacular 'unruliness', that she is able to agentially trouble the boundaries of femininity as well as the coupled norm, opening up space for transformation *through* her very abjectification.

The interviews revealed the acute affective discomfort that the women I spoke to experienced as a consequence of silencing around their single status and the erasure of single women in popular cultural representations. Within a context of silencing, lack or 'absence' of single femininity both intersubjectively and in the media, accounts of their own single identity were conflicted and ambivalent, lacking in stability or coherence and produced a significant amount of psychic tension. In moments of intersubjective silencing, their subjectivity as a gendered single subject failed and was rendered illegible or erased, often causing deep distress. Although the women told me that sometimes they were glad *not*

to discuss the topic of their singledom, they still felt the deeply abjectifying, regulatory effects of such silence/absence. The women were often found to be painfully caught between an *unreconcilable* desire for recognition and stability as a single subject, and a desire *not* to be defined and hence regulated by the category of 'single'.

In response to this tension, some sought to engage with fantasies of heteronormative coupled femininity, and to be acknowledged as (potentially) coupled. This response is borne from the women's desire to shift from an abject, liminal positioning to that of a non-single, coupled subject and worked politically to resecure the heterosexual norm. Several fearfully evoked or tried to disavow abjectified cultural representations of masculinised, aging or mentally unstable single femininities. The accounts did however conversely reveal how the failure of the single subject can be understood ambivalently 'as a process of unbecoming' and productively offer more creative ways of being. I argue that the failure to performatively repeat normative femininity opens up new spaces for its reconfiguration. In this respect, the single women, while often maintaining psychic investment in coupled femininity, also presented liberatory fantasies which envisioned alternative family formations and decentred the romantic monogamous coupled norm, transforming and subverting traditional structures of intimate life, particularly when positioned as non-heterosexual subjects.

In sum, both the media representations and interviews revealed a deeply complex understanding of the construction of single subjectivity which captured the often ambivalent nature of such transformations. Thus while single femininity is abjectified through significant processes of silencing, incoherence and invisibility, single feminine subjectivity through its very abjection opens up spaces for contestation which allow for a broader reconfiguration of the feminine coupled norm and a challenging of the heterosexual norm, working to sustain *and* threaten normative femininity.

## Chapter 8. Conclusion

### 8.1 Introduction

While historically the single woman has long been stigmatised, in this thesis I have been concerned with how such a figure is being constructed in the *contemporary* postfeminist cultural and social context. This issue is increasingly urgent in the context of steadily growing numbers of single women over the past two decades in US and UK, and the limited body of work theorising how women encounter and negotiate cultural representations within their everyday lives. Indeed, the discursive construction of single femininity in the contemporary moment and the experience of single women remains critically under researched. There is thus an urgent need to examine how discursive constructions of singledom works to produce, regulate, reconfigure or threaten feminine subjectivity, at the level of popular culture and how this is affecting single women's lives.

This is especially timely in a contemporary moment which is marked more broadly by a deepening economic crisis, a global pandemic, which is weakening social ties and the continued erosion of welfare provision, leading to rising precarity for women (McRobbie, 2020). Therefore, I set out to better understand not only how single women are negotiating contemporary popular cultural representations of singledom, but how their single subjectivities are profoundly shaped by the cultural realm, through exploring the relationship between the two. Existing research suggests that while contemporary cultural representations of single femininity continue to be construed in narrow, stigmatising, regulatory ways, there is paradoxically significant diversity within the lived experience of single women. Given this puzzle, I wanted to explore why such empirical shifts are not being reflected at the cultural level and what the consequences are for single women's everyday lives. I also sought to investigate this in the broader context of what I argue is a pervasive anxiety within contemporary society around such societal changes. I build on Taylor's suggestion that the decline in marriage rates has led to a reactionary recentering of heteronormative coupledness and resecuring of normative heterosexual desire at the cultural level (Taylor, 2012, p. 23) Yet I update Anthea Taylor's study into the popular cultural representation of the single woman in several significant ways. By exploring how such a figure emerges in a contemporary context of deepening economic precarity and erosion of welfare provision, I have shown how successful single femininity continues to be linked to middle-class aspirations of professionalism, lifestyle and consumption, but now requires the single subject to negotiate such precarity by demonstrating individualised resilience and affective self-regulation (Gill & Orgad, 2015; McRobbie, 2020). For example, in *Frances Ha*, while Frances initially experiences significant economic precarity, by the end of the film she 'successfully' acquires her own apartment based on her middle-class connections and self-transformation into an independent, confident professional. Within the interview data in particular I have shown how class distinctions in the context of rapidly rising cost of living and job insecurity profoundly impact not only the material living conditions of single women, but also how

women *experience* discourses of consumption. Their accounts thus puncture the aspirational allure of mediated discourses of consumption which I have shown are still highly visible within representations of singledom. There has also been an intensification of postfeminist discourses of self-surveillance and incitement to self-transformation which Taylor highlights (See also Chapter 8.4 below). Yet I go further to show how this is operating in new, more insidious ways through significant *affective* self-regulation and how this is profoundly impacting on women's everyday experiences and desires at the deepest psychic level. I also show how this affective regulation occurs intergenerationally, and through intersections of sexuality and embodiment, particularly for younger women. Finally I illuminate the deep distress that incitements to transform the body according to heterosexual norms of attractiveness is causing and how this regulation is intensified for single women of colour. Yet I also illuminate what alternative visions and fantasies of singledom single women constructed, which, while not *necessarily* being wholly drawn from the cultural realm, are nevertheless always informed by it.

In order to address these questions, I looked at how the figure of the single woman is being constructed in contemporary popular cultural US-UK texts and how single women living in London construct their lived experience of singledom. Examining both these sets of data, I focused my analysis around two main research questions: what fantasies do contemporary cultural representations of the single woman mobilise? How are these fantasies negotiated within single women's self-narratives of subjectivity? I used a thematic and a Foucauldian discourse analysis to analyse both sets of data which I brought together through the lens of fantasy (Fuss, 1995). I drew on Foucault's theory of subjectivity as discursively constructed, to understand how gendered regimes of *power* are implicated in the formation of the single female subject (Foucault, 1982). Foucault's theory presents a complex understanding of power which simultaneously contains both regulation *and* resistance and understands power as both regulatory *and* productive. Yet I deepened this by drawing on Butler's psychosocial understanding of subjectivity. This allowed for a contextualised, historicised and *shifting* understanding of how power is implicated in such moments. I used it to trace how desires surrounding fantasies of femininity may operate in ways which both constitute and regulate but also potentially transform or subvert gendered norms (Butler, 1997). Thinking with Butler's theory of subjectivity allowed me to draw together the political, psychic *and* social to create a complex, nuanced understanding of how subjectivity is formed within contextualised, relational processes of power, at multiple levels. This was consistent with my desire to explore where there were transformations or reversals of power. This approach was particularly helpful as it complemented my use of the psychoanalytical concept of fantasy to draw both data sets together. I also incorporated Butler's theorisation of single femininity as performatively constructed, in order to pay attention to where there were breaks or reconfigurations within repetitions of normative femininity. This approach also allowed me to interrogate how femininity was being troubled, threatened or perhaps undone through discourses of singledom.

In this concluding chapter, I first discuss the findings of my empirical analysis. In particular I discuss the surprises, connectivities and inconsistencies that emerged in each set of data, as well as *between* them, and what this means for trying to understand the relationship between the how subjectivities are constructed at the cultural and individual level. My first set of empirical findings reveal there are celebratory discourses centred around freedom and autonomy, which are deeply intersected and circumscribed by class. Troublingly, these discourses are found to be underpinned by a regulatory and compelling process of continual self-surveillance and incitement to self-transform, which I explored in my second empirical chapter. Finally I reveal how the penalties for failing to achieve ‘freedom’ and correctly self-survey led to abjectifying processes of silencing and erasure of the single woman as a subject. I then discuss the major theoretical and methodological contributions of my thesis in constructing a richer conceptualisation of subjectivity formation and a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the cultural realm and psychic life at the individual level. I reveal how women are responding to, investing in and struggling with cultural constructions of single femininity in challenging and at times radical ways. I consider what my research adds to debates on the extent to which postfeminist culture has seen a reconfiguration of contemporary femininities, and what my findings suggest in terms of understanding postfeminist culture. I end the chapter by discussing what the implications are for single feminine subjectivities, as well as gendered power structures as a whole, in a contemporary moment which is characterised by increasing economic precarity, austerity and the global Covid-19 pandemic. I discuss what impact the limitations of my study has had on my findings, but I also suggest where this opens up avenues for future research, such as investigating non-mainstream media and including the voices of transgender women as possible productive sites for identifying resistant discourses.

## **8.2 Findings from the media representations and interview accounts**

### **8.2.1 The successful single subject**

Discourses of ‘successful’ single femininity are found to coalesce primarily around ‘freedom’, and are specifically articulated through postfeminist themes of independence, autonomy and agency. These discourses are prominent across both the cultural texts and single women’s accounts. While these have been established as significant themes in existing literature on postfeminist media culture, my analysis has shown that they persist within the contemporary context in complex ways. Indeed, within the context of a deepening neoliberalisation of postfeminist culture (Taylor, 2012), the single woman foregrounds and celebrates individualised achievements, such as economic and professional success, obscuring how she is in other ways subject to regulatory gendered structures of power.

First, successful singledom is constructed as a rational, emotionally detached and self-sufficient affective state. This is positioned in opposition to more *undesirable* states of dependency and social connection.

However the ‘liberatory’ freedom which the single subject is enticed to ‘enjoy’ is revealed to be intersected with age and temporality – with freedom and independence only to be claimed by younger singles, achieved quickly as possible, and as briefly as possible, before ‘progressing’ on to a ‘dependent’ heteronormatively coupled state. The single woman who does not transition *quickly* into independence is conversely rendered emotionally dysfunctional, immature and stalled in her development. While these themes are repeated across the cultural texts and the single women’s self-narratives, the latter presents a more nuanced, ambivalent understanding in comparison to the more utopian constructions of independence found in the media. Specifically, in the interviews, the younger women I spoke to retain a real sense of optimism towards such a fantasy of independence. But many of the older singles, or those moving towards midlife, express a more ambivalent desire to maintain social connections rather than be entirely independent. This was particularly true when midlife singles looked to the future, several of whom were haunted by the stigmatising historical trope of the isolated ‘old maid’ (Lahad & Hazan, 2014). For Sam, 36, independence becomes isolation in older age, and she palpably describes becoming a ‘lonely, single, 45-year-old’ as one of her biggest fears. While older singles are largely obscured from the media texts, which almost exclusively centre on women in their 20s and 30s, the older single women I spoke to instead constructed surprising *alternative* fantasy improvisations. If we recall Margaret, age 66, takes advantage of her lack of social ties to construct a vision of moving to the Indian subcontinent and starting a new life. These accounts resist historical tropes of the ageing, lonely, single women, to subvert the binary of isolation and social connection, and radically challenge the privileging of coupled femininity.

Second, independence is narrowly constructed through *economic* freedoms – articulated within media discourses of consumption and professional advancement – reinvigorating postfeminist tropes of the single career woman and femininity as a commoditised *lifestyle*, while at the same time reinscribing hierarchies of race and class. While the freedom to consume and to pursue career advancement are discourses that are unproblematically taken up by the middle-class women, the less-well off single women described to me the pain of negotiating these narratives which expose the stark contrast with their lived experience. Such single women highlight how their single status exposes them to greater economic hardship and *limits* their choices. When it comes to media discourses relating to embodiment and consumption, the single women I spoke to consistently expressed a strong desire to reject such pervasive, deeply regulatory discourses, while still maintaining a conflicting, close proximity to them.

More surprisingly there are moments of transgression in some of the media texts, where fantasies of freedom reconfigure normative ideas of what constitutes ‘the good life’. Frances and her friend Sophie in *Frances Ha* construct a vision of a shared future which upends traditional notions of romantic love and privileging of coupledness by centring platonic friendship, decentring sexual and reproductive relationships and offering a form of affective recognition usually denied to friendship. Discourses of

freedom are constructed in the media texts in more radical ways when articulated through themes of sexual autonomy and intersected with black and ethnic minority femininities, non-monogamy and bisexuality. If we recall Kalinda from *The Good Wife*, her positioning outside the racial, sexual and coupled norms of femininity allows her to trouble such regulatory boundaries and construct a more transformative configuration of autonomous, single female subjectivity. Not only are Kalinda's non-monogamous, non-heterosexual encounters largely emotionally and sexually fulfilling, she uses her (bi)sexual autonomy to actively resist heteronormative subjectification. Such depictions work to counter both the hypersexualisation/asexualisation of single femininities and trouble, if not transform, regulatory boundaries of femininity and (hetero)sexuality. Within the interview accounts, the women offer a less utopian understanding of such freedom, centring close, emotionally fulfilling friendships, yet also describing the threat these relationships present to normative coupledness, both by themselves, and through intersubjective regulation from others. For example, Caroline, 55, told me she has sacrificed a close, platonic friendship in order to become (potentially) coupled.

Thus, popular constructions and women's narratives of singledom continue to attach to fantasies of the romantic coupled norm, *alongside* a desire for independence, presenting a highly complex and deeply ambivalent understanding of how women encounter such discourses. This constructed a cruelly optimistic attachment to romantic discourses, which offered the women I interviewed both a chance for affective recognition and *pleasurable* attachment, at the same time as producing deep disappointment (Berlant, 2011).

### **8.2.2 The surveilled single subject**

The 'freedom' enjoyed by the successful single subject in the media and single women's accounts is *paradoxically* achieved through an intensive processes of self-surveillance, regulation and self-transformation. I argue that single femininity is *produced* as a technology of the self (Foucault, 1988) through an intensive self-regulatory regime, involving the presentation of the single self as a free, independent and autonomous subject. The single subject is compelled to identify, construct and maintain the 'correct' single self through intensive self-monitoring. Both contemporary popular texts and single women's narratives highlight that it is *through* such a regulatory process that the single woman is required to transform herself into an independent subject. In the media texts singledom is an opportunity to discover the self, but this self has to be continually and actively monitored, with the successful single subject one who identifies, and confidently presents, the correct 'authentic' stable self, at the correct moment. In the interviews, while the women also presented singledom as an opportunity to cultivate or redefine the self, they concurrently struggled to maintain a stable sense of self, often anxious that this 'self' will be eclipsed by coupledness *or* singledom.

Contemporary cultural representations tell single women that they must intensively self-regulate through the cultivation of the ‘correct’ sexuality and embodiment, in ways which reinscribe dominant hierarchies of age, sexuality, race and embodiment. While the single woman is required to be a sexually desiring and *desirable* subject within the media representations, and this is repeated in the accounts of the women I interviewed, sexual encounters have to be carefully affectively and behaviourally regulated in order to maintain an ‘independent’ self. The regulation of embodiment is also insidiously intertwined with affective regulation; women connected dissatisfaction with embodiment with an enticing pressure to cultivate an upbeat disposition. This is experienced more intensively by non-white and non-heterosexual women who told me of their anxiety at being *both* hypersexualised and not heterosexually attractive enough in their embodiment and behaviours. At both the cultural and individual level, the single woman is not only self-regulating but also incited to self-regulate intersubjectively through the silent, surveilling gaze of those around her. The processes of intersubjective regulation are more prominent in the single women’s accounts than the media texts, and they presented a complex, ambivalent response, at times rejecting such regulation, while still experiencing it as profoundly painful.

Yet the self-surveillance of sexuality and embodiment emerges in a more transformative way to subvert the hierarchy of stigmatising racialised discourses and revalue non-hypersexualised black femininity, blurring the binary of asexualisation/hypersexualisation. As we see in *Chewing Gum*, Tracey acknowledges that she wishes to appear sexually desirable by going to a sex club but actively resists hypersexualisation by stopping herself from engaging in sexual acts. She further aligns herself with an unconventional, non-sexualised celebrity, Whoopi Goldberg, and rejects calls from her friends to hypersexualise her appearance.

The single subject is also required to engage in a process of self-transformation: in the media texts, this operates through consumption and affective regulation and sustains single femininity as a period of intensive, empowering, self-transformation into an independent subject. Yet again I found that independence is limited to freedom to consume and fails to fundamentally challenge patriarchal and gendered structures of normative coupled femininity. Within *Elle* magazine, the successful single is required to transform towards independence and eventual heteronormative coupledness according to strict temporal limits: within a *short* timeframe, without delay or unnecessary prolonging of the state of singledom. Those who do not meet such temporal goals are stalled in their development and as a failing to correctly ‘mature’. The single subject is also required to be affectively regulating, and ensure that she presents a confident upbeat, positive affective state at all times. While the white, heterosexual single woman in *Elle* US magazine’s Single Lady Issue engages in bisexual behaviour as a way of indicating her self-transformation from heartbroken and lonely, to confident and ready to recouple, black single women were constructed more deviantly, with angry ‘revenge bods’ a sign of their self-transformation into successful self-regulating singles.



For the women I interviewed, temporality operates in oppositional ways, particularly when intersected with age. While the younger single women anxiously take up discourses surrounding delay/immediacy and maturation, older single women, such as Gemma, radically reconfigure such temporalities, minimising the perceived time panic through the creation of alternative valuations of time and visions of the future, but not without experiencing significant pain. Concerningly, the women I interviewed reveal anxiety over what they feel is a pervasive pressure to transform their embodiment and affective state. They spoke of distress that they might not fulfil heterosexual norms of sexual attractiveness – even if they don't actively transform themselves, the anxiety was deeply felt. It is notable that several of the middle-class single women choose to affectively self-transform through therapy or with help from close friends, and many, though not all, position this as something they are doing to eventually become coupled. Following Berlant, they maintained a close fidelity to the romantic coupled norm – a fantasy which remained a source of disappointment but *not* disenchantment (Berlant, 2008).

To summarise, the single subject is not only required to intensively identify and monitor the self but to also transform herself into an empowered, independent single subject according to strict temporal rules. Singledom is harnessed as part of a Foucauldian project of continual, intensive cultivation of the self, 'where the intimate sphere becomes a site of tireless production of the self' and labour is directed towards self-work rather than structural change (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 77; McGhee, 2005). While such discourses are often met with ambivalence or at times resisted by the women I spoke to, such negotiations nevertheless often result in deep psychic tension.

### **8.2.3 The 'failed' single subject**

However, where the single subject does not achieve independence or correctly self-survey, there is an abjectifying *failure* of the single subject. In such moments, in both the media texts and self-narratives there is a threatening or even an undoing of normative feminine subjectivity. Processes of abjection produce the single woman as outside the boundaries of intelligibility, render her unsymbolisable and untenable as a subject, and position her as a deficit 'non-subject' defined by what she 'lacks'. Following Butler, her abjection occurs through processes of silencing, invisibility and incoherence, which operate in the context of a *broad* invisibility of the single woman at the cultural level (Butler, 2011, p. 142). She is erased in ways which see her viability as a subject fail and exclude her from affective recognition. She both self-silences and is silenced by others in ways which work to reinscribe gendered hierarchies and fail to challenge gendered structures of power, across both sets of data.

In the media texts, there was an overall absence of the single woman and where she did appear, she was produced as incoherent through her instability as a subject, threatening femininity through associations with historical, masculinised forms of deviancy, danger and spectacular 'unruliness'. Yet, as seen in the

detective, such abjectifying instability *at times* allows her to transcend the coupled norm. Through her marginal positioning at the limits of normative femininity she reconfigures the organisation of intimate life in radical ways. Yet there remains a deep ambivalence around such a transformative ‘unruly’ figure, who elicits a hedonistic celebration of formerly pathologized tropes yet is contained through her association with contamination and disgust (Rowe, 1995). For example, in *HTBS*, Robin’s body and speech are spectacular through their ‘excessiveness’, and her hedonistic promiscuity transgresses gendered norms of heterosexuality and monogamy. But she is linked to abjectifying tropes of disgust through an association with bodily fluids and drugs. Such containment works ultimately to discharge the threat to gender hierarchies that the ‘unruly’ single woman poses, with normative femininity resecured to coupledness.

Unlike in the media representations, the single women I met were often ‘erased’ through *intersubjective silencing*, most intensely through the mother-daughter relationship. Not only do the single women experience these moments of silencing as an erasure or destabilising of their sense of self, they are caught between an irreconcilable desire for recognition as a single subject *and* a desire not to be recognised, in an abjectified state of non-belonging. This produces a significant psychic tension and discomfort as they are unable to fulfil their fantasmatic *desire for* a coherent identification or ‘stable’ gender identity (Butler, 1997, p. 136). Such silencing is deeply intersected with older age: while less visible in the media representations, the historical trope of the aging, socially isolated ‘old maid’ continues to haunt the accounts of the younger interviewees. The women spoke of how the absence of and incoherence of the single subject at the cultural level produces an instability within their own sense of self. For example illegibility could be seen through their contradictory construction of themselves as both independent *and* socially connected. The women at times *displaced* the distress caused by such abjectionification by radically disidentifying with singledom. Indeed, most of the women told of their desire to move from an abjectified single state to the coupled subject. This indicates a strong attachment to and desire to remain at least close to, if not within, the promise of happiness and fantasy of the good life which normative coupledness and familial structures represent (Berlant, 2008). Thus, as Berlant writes, they are trapped in a relationship of cruel optimism, either through a desire to be acknowledged as (potentially) coupled or by pleasurably engaging with cultural representations which reinscribe these romance narratives (Berlant, 2011).

Yet we can read such ‘failures’ to repeat normative femininity more productively as a process of ‘unbecoming’, which allows for a radical reconfiguration of single female subjectivity, and a reconsideration or expansion of what constitutes success within intimate life (Banet-Weiser et al., 2019; Halberstam, 2011, p. 23). For example, interviewees occasionally drew upon more deviant representations of single femininity – such as Saga Norén in *The Bridge* who does not conform to social norms – as a release from the acutely regulatory pressures of normative coupled femininity. Alternative,

more ambivalent fantasies arise within moments of ‘failure’ where disappointment over not conforming to coupledness is held *together* with a pleasurable attachment to the promise of romantic love.

Finally, the non-heterosexual single women shared more liberatory fantasies of singledom which envisioned alternative family formations and worked to decentre the monogamous romantic couple, transforming and subverting the traditional structures of intimate life. Thus, the women tell of highly diverse fantasies of intimate life which, while perhaps not surprisingly less utopian and more complex than the media discourses, offer some alternative spaces of belonging and recognition that draw upon, but at times subvert, cultural discourses. These processes of abjection demonstrate the significant penalties that growing numbers of women continue to face within contemporary discourses and the pressures that they inflict on women’s everyday lived experience. While the women I met sometimes revealed to me more productive moments of ‘unbecoming’, the work that they have to perform to subvert or challenge such abjection is *significant*.

In summary, my findings show that contemporary cultural discourses of single femininity foreground and celebrate fantasies which are primarily structured through postfeminist, masculinised logics of freedom, independence and autonomy. It is through these fantasies that the single subject is incited to engage in the economic independence and pleasurable ‘freedom’ to consume, and to advance within the professional sphere. But these freedoms are troublingly intersected by hierarchical structures of class, race, age and sexuality, which, to a perhaps surprising but important extent, continue to reinvigorate historical tropes of deviancy and isolation. Those femininities which are more liminally positioned, such as bisexual and ethnic minorities, sometimes trouble, if not transform, the gendered and coupled norm, centering platonic friendship, decentering sexual and reproductive relationships, and subverting historical tropes in more radical ways. Yet, such ‘freedom’ is paradoxically achieved through a process of intense self-surveillance, regulation and transformation. Popular constructions incite the single female subject to become self-knowing and to use such knowledge to continually monitor her single femininity and ensure she transforms within strict temporal limits, into a ‘free’ single (eventually coupled) subject. Such an incitement operates through cultivation of sexuality and embodiment in ways which sustain postfeminist logics of affective, embodied and behavioural regulation, ensuring that she is sexually desiring and attractive yet affectively and behaviourally regulating, always maintaining an upbeat, positive, confident self. Those who do not achieve such transformation are rendered abject, with older single femininities erased. Thinking with Butler, I argue that normative coupled feminine subjectivity is maintained through the production of the abjected *single* female as invisible, incoherent and illegible within the cultural texts. Yet such abjectifying instability *at times* works more productively and ambivalently to transcend the coupled norm, subvert stigmatising tropes of undesirability and promiscuity, and challenge the privileging of romantic love.

For the women I spoke to, discourses of independence are often invoked and reinscribed unproblematically, particularly by younger women, with the freedom to consume and pursue career success taken up enthusiastically by the more well-off single women. The mid-life singles I met told of how they feel deeply regulated by discourses of temporality, and fear of the spectre of older singledom as socially isolated, producing significant tension. However the older singles instead subvert the binary between social connection and isolation in transformatory ways. While some interviewees continue to remain deeply attached to the coupled norm, they also transcend it, at least temporarily, through platonic forms of emotional intimacy and ‘coupling’. Many of the women expressed resistance towards the regulation of their sexuality and embodiment, yet often *alongside* a continued attachment to such discourses and expressions of pain. They worked to affectively regulate and transform their single subjectivities in ways that may allow them to (eventually) enter normative coupledness. There were moments of resistance where self-regulation opened up alternative visions of transformation. Finally, the single women’s accounts reveal how processes of abjection – both obscuration in the media representations but also intersubjectivity through processes of silencing – produced deep pain and psychic tension. The women articulated a conflicting, sometimes distressing, desire to be both *recognised* in certain moments yet also to *disidentify* with single subjectivity. Yet processes of abjection could be transformative, with those singles closest to the limits of normative femininity more likely to subvert the romantic coupled norm. They instead created an alternative vision of fulfilling intimacy through the centring of alternative kinship networks and decentering of normative coupledness, yet often at huge emotional cost.

### 8.3 Contributions

Through this research, I have significantly expanded our understanding of the relationship between cultural representations and subjectivity formation within a postfeminist cultural context. I have shown how many of the characteristics of a postfeminist culture and sensibility are not only prevalent but reinvigorated in contemporary media representations and interview accounts of singledom. Amidst debates about the continued usefulness of postfeminism as a concept (see Chapter 1.4), I argue that postfeminism thus continues to be a valid framework through which to explore gendered identities within contemporary cultures. I concur with Angela McRobbie’s argument that while the present moment does feature a resurgence of feminist discourses, this is accompanied by heightened and intensified forms of self-regulation which negate any gains which may have been achieved by this greater visibility (McRobbie, 2015). Contemporary media discourses continue to invoke and dismiss feminist ideas, and I argue that this dismissal of feminist ideas is highly subtle, working to covertly sustain neoconservative values of normative coupledness through *apparently* feminist discourses of independence, choice and autonomy, particularly through themes of professionalisation, self-surveillance and sexualisation. I demonstrate that discourses of self-surveillance continue to be foregrounded, deeply

intertwined as they are with highly regulatory discourses of empowerment, choice and self-transformation. Yet this thesis also makes a major contribution to understandings of how self-surveillance is *experienced* within women's lived single femininity, particularly through intersubjective relations. I have shown there are significant intersections with discourses of temporality, and these are extended in new ways through neoliberalised discourses. I contribute to debates surrounding postfeminism and neoliberal feminism. For example, I demonstrate that discourses of singledom speak to and sustain a new focus on futurity, where actions *now* (investing time in cultivating the 'self') are calculated according to achieving specific future (coupled) returns (Rottenberg, 2017). My research supports the assertion that postfeminist culture contains competing discourses, which can *include* neoliberalised feminist discourses (Gill, 2017). There are also fundamental shifts in themes of sexualisation, which are complexified through an enticing compulsion to present as a heteronormatively attractive, *and* as a sexually desiring yet self-regulating, subject. Such themes also continue to be intersected by race.

I have contributed not only to a deeper understanding of how postfeminist culture is currently configured, but also perhaps more surprisingly, how it reinvigorates and at times partially transforms historical tropes which have long stigmatised single femininities. By historically situating the contemporary moment alongside contemporary lived experience to investigate the continuities and disparities between them, I have demonstrated the ways in which key historical tropes of single femininity continue to be repeated and reinvigorated in new ways through entanglement with postfeminist themes. My findings also show what effect historical tropes continue to have on women's psyches – an area which has so far not been addressed within the literature on single femininity. For example, the historical trope of deviancy continues to be reconfigured within contemporary postfeminist culture in new ways. Rather than only being reinscribed through intersections with non-white and working-class femininities, while this does continue to occur, I found that the liminality of deviant identities productively transforms single femininities at the cultural level and the individual level, particularly through promiscuity and mental dysfunction. And while I build on arguments that the trope of the aging socially isolated single woman troublingly persists, the older single women I spoke to resist such understandings and trouble the binary of isolation and social connection. Unlike historical representations, there is a lack of evidence of mental dysfunction being linked to non-sexual relationships, but alternative relationships formations, while being deeply transformatory, at times are used to reinscribe heteronormativity. The reductive trope of the single career woman as being unable to reconcile professional success with personal fulfilment continues to be reinscribed. Yet while the media representations and the single women I spoke to celebrate discourses of professional advancement, these are deeply intersected along class and racial hierarchies. While the historical trope of hypersexualisation is extended to white middle-class single femininity, the hypersexualisation of non-

white femininities works in more transformative ways to queer gender binaries and to trouble the monogamous heterosexual coupled norm, particularly through sexual autonomy.

I have also theorised more precisely how a postfeminist sensibility *profoundly* shapes feminine subjectivity through an enticing requirement to perform intensive self-surveillance and engage in self-transformation. Such compulsion to self-survey operates, as a pleasurable and productive incitement to construct and maintain the single self in particularly ways, yet *also* in more regulatory, oppressive and painful ways (Foucault, 1988). The single woman is induced to pleurably engage in self ‘discovery’ and the cultivation of a liberated, independent, ‘authentic’ single self. Yet, in the interview accounts, the women revealed both the impossibility of achieving such a self, alongside a desire to *still* achieve it. And while the single woman is seduced into cultivating a particular form of desirable embodiment and heterosexual attractiveness, the incitement to do so was distressingly inescapable, even for those who did not want to engage with such discourses. The single women I spoke to were thus interpellated into performing significant affective self-regulation, and often felt compelled to transform themselves into emotionally self-regulating, self-empowered, independent, postfeminist subjects. The accounts suggest that this self-surveillance is at times experienced as overwhelming, while still being captivatingly *impossible* to resist. Thus I have demonstrated the ways in which postfeminist discourses of singledom within the contemporary moment intensively produce and regulate female subjectivity as a technology of the self (Foucault, 1988).

While I have remained closely attentive to popular cultural texts as a significant site for the construction of feminine subjectivities (see Chapter 1.4), there is a significant absence of literature which explores the ways in which women encounter and *negotiate* contemporary cultural representations of femininity and how this shapes subjectivity formation, a gap which my thesis significantly contributes towards understanding. I offer a more complex theorisation of the relationship between cultural representations and individual subjectivity formation at the psychic level. I have demonstrated that such a relationship is highly complex, with women negotiating narrowly defined, stigmatising and regulatory representations in both pleasurable *and* painful ways. While they demonstrate resistance to and reconfiguration of such discourses, often in transformatory and alternative ways, this work inflicts a significant emotional toll. My approach does not aim to be an audience study, rather it aims to illuminate more clearly how discourses at the collective, societal, and cultural level influence, shape and produce individual psychic life. I do so by combining a Foucauldian discursive approach to subjectivity with a Butlerian psychosocial understanding in new and creative ways. I have used Foucault and Butler *together* to investigate how desires operating discursively at both the collective cultural level and at the individual level are implicated in the *psychic* formation of gendered identity. Thinking with Judith Butler’s psychosocial theory of subjectivity allows for a deeper, more nuanced understanding of gendered subjectivity as a desiring, active process through which with subject is agentially incited to engage with

discourses of power at the cultural and individual level (Butler, 1997). By drawing on a Foucauldian discursive analysis and a psychosocial understanding of subjectivity, I am able to represent the complex, at times deeply messy, relationship between the two spheres. My research demonstrates the subtle ways in which the lived, socially located experience of feminine subjectivity is profoundly impacted by, yet also active in, shaping understandings of subjectivity and intimate life. I resist a discursive psychological approach, which examines subjectivity from a more individualised perspective (Lai et al., 2015; Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003a). By using the concept of fantasy, I contribute theoretically to an understanding of how fantasies in media do not operate outside of or separately to the individual subject, who then ‘chooses’ to engage or resist. Instead I conceptualise cultural fantasies as actively implicated within the formation of the subject, which are engaged with even in moments of resistance. Importantly, by incorporating Butler’s understanding of gender as performative, I argue that singledom is a form of gendered performativity, which means that there is always the potential for transformation of gendered structures of power. By theorising single femininity as being fantasmically *performed* at the cultural and the individual level, this opens up moments for disruption, failure but also reinscription of the feminine norm.

Using Butler’s psychosocial theory of subjectivity, I also contribute to a more subtle and nuanced understanding of how stigma and resistance occur within the formation of single subjectivity. I move beyond placing these in a binary opposition and instead consider the ways in which subject formation may operate more ambivalently through both processes of identification *and* resistant disidentification with stigmatising discourses. I conceptualise marginality as not always stigmatising but as also having the *potential* to trouble regulatory boundaries of gender. I also conceptualise resistance more broadly as operating in multiple ways which may challenge certain structures of power but may also reinscribe other structures of power. There are moments where both complicity with and resistance to particular structures occur *simultaneously*, for example, in relation to how women negotiate mediated discourses of sexuality and embodiment. As part of this, I have demonstrated that the media is not homogenously regulatory or stigmatising but contains inconsistencies, reversals and resistance with respect to multiple tropes of single femininity.

Finally, I have employed an intersectional approach to counter the significant lack of literature on how ethnic minority single women in the UK understand singledom in their everyday lived experience. This literature has so far often been centred on US-based contexts and ethnicities. And while existing literature has also almost exclusively focused on examining single femininities within discreet age and class categories, I have looked at all ages and classes together, to consider how discourses operate across and between these groups, enriching our understanding of how these categories shape understandings and experiences of singledom. Methodologically, my thesis builds on and contributes substantially to a better understanding of how the single woman as a figure is emerging in popular cultural representations

*and* how single feminine subjectivities are constructed in lived experience in the UK, a location which has been significantly under researched.

#### **8.4 Implications, limitations and future directions**

This study is also important in demonstrating what it means to be a single woman within the contemporary context which, most recently, has been dominated by the Covid-19 global pandemic, and is preceded by a deepening crisis in housing, care and welfare over the past decade. As many scholars have discussed, UK society since 2010 has been characterised by widening economic and social inequalities, and rising unemployment predicated by the dismantling and withdrawal of the welfare state through austerity measures and a foregrounding of the nuclear family (McRobbie, 2020; Orgad & De Benedictis, 2015). Women are overall more likely to be adversely affected by the UK government's austerity measures and to be in part-time or precarious employment<sup>51</sup> (Allen et al., 2014). Such disparities have been exposed and compounded by the Covid-19 global pandemic and subsequent recession – at the time of writing, the UK was experiencing the worst economic recession since records began<sup>52</sup>. As McRobbie has argued, the all-consuming work of building an individualised 'resilience' has become the substitution for welfare provision (McRobbie, 2020). Therefore, the material effects of singledom for increasing numbers of women who are surviving on a single-household income are profound and produce urgent, additional anxieties for many single women. Not only do single women face cultural delegitimation, but they are increasingly exposed to greater economic insecurity amidst a lack of welfare and household support. As Littler argues, housing, education and employment work *together* to construct socio-economic inequalities, and the social context and familial positioning of the subject may compound inequalities and exclusions in multiple, intersecting ways (Littler, 2017). The continued lack of affordable housing (particularly in London), high levels of unemployment and university tuition fees in the UK, work together to construct a multitude of barriers for single women who have a lower income and lack the additional security of familial or state support. Several of my interviewees spoke of how the high cost of living in London, particularly accommodation, has limited the conditions of possibility for how they lived their lives, particularly those who could not turn to family for help. Those on higher incomes often mentioned their relief at not being constrained by the increased financial liabilities of singledom.

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<sup>51</sup> The 2020 House of Commons Briefing Paper 'Women and the Economy' states 40% of women in employment were part-time compared to 13% of men. The ONS 'Contracts that do not guarantee a minimum number of hours: April 2018' report showed that 55% of workers on zero-hour contracts were women, of whom were age 21-34.

<sup>52</sup> <https://www.investmentweek.co.uk/news/4020936/covid-19-plunges-uk-economy-deepest-recession>.



However, throughout this study I have also shown how single women actively negotiate and at times reconcile these anxieties and unequal positionings within gendered power structures through their engagement with and negotiation of fantasies of single femininity in cultural representations. Drawing on psychoanalysis, McRobbie has discussed how the cultural – via for example the intimate voice of the women’s magazine – appeals to the tensions women and girls experience at the level of the everyday *and* the psychic level (McRobbie, 2020). I argue that while such tensions are appealed to, some are resolved, yet some are reanimated within the cultural realm. As well as offering a resolution to significant psychic anxieties and pain surrounding single femininity generated by the economic precarities of and social positioning of the single woman – I have argued, following Radway, that the cultural realm has offered a way of discharging the perceived ‘threat’ of feminine singledom to patriarchal structures (Radway, 1984). The women I spoke to thus took up, disrupted and reconfigured cultural discourses of singledom to make sense of and (sometimes pleasurably) reconcile the psychic conflicts that they encountered in everyday life and the disparities between the ‘ideal’ feminine single subject and their lived reality (Walkerdine, 1984). My project is therefore more broadly part of an effort within cultural studies to demonstrate the importance of how the structural shapes experience, rather than considering them as solely personal accounts. I have demonstrated how cultural narratives fundamentally shape – and at times painfully regulate – intimate life and how these processes can occur *alongside* moments of resistance (Orgad, 2020b).

The major limitations of my study were primarily methodological ones relating to diversity of sampling (See also Chapter 4.2.4). Due to the scope and timings of the project, I was unable to recruit transgender or non-binary, female-identifying singles, despite advertising widely within various suitable forums. Including transgender or non-binary singles in the study would have provided a more diverse and perhaps a more complex understanding of how femininity is understood and experienced by non-cisgender subjects. I also did not find any media representations of transgender and non-binary single femininity, which could have offered deeper insights into how these subjectivities are culturally represented and how these representations are being negotiated. By including such groups, future studies could better illuminate those aspects of single femininity that resist or travel *across* boundaries of biological determinism and the gender binary. As a feminist project, it is also important to include transgender and non-binary women’s voices in light of the significant obscuration and discrimination such groups currently face. Inclusion of non-cisgender women would have allowed for a deeper understanding of how a failure to conform to the boundaries of normative femininity intersects with gender *and* singledom. Yet such an analysis is, I think worthy of its own individual investigation, and inclusion within this project may have led to the partial obscuration of such important distinctions. I would also like to add that while this study draws on the concept of the abject, it does not seek to make judgement in *comparison* to any other forms of abjection in relation to intersectional studies of gender,

which operate in deeply complex, important and differing ways and to make any comparison would merit extensive study in itself.

While the media representations I have analysed are comprehensive in terms of encompassing a range of mass media popular cultural genres, and a breadth of representations of race, class, embodiment and sexuality, my study doesn't claim to be representative of the whole of popular culture. Instead I seek to provide illustrative, information-rich examples which align with my focus, and resonate with the themes I have identified. Having said this, as outlined in the methodology chapter, another significant limitation I encountered when surveying the field was that I found few social media accounts or blogs aimed at or written by single women. However, in the final stages of writing up, I found one active social media account (through a mention in the mainstream press) where, while not targeted exclusively at women, single people globally contribute to a lively discussion of their experiences and includes *some* narratives of resistance. This indicates that there are some active online communities, which invites exploration of how more personalised, possibly more resistant forms of representation, outside the mainstream media sphere, work to construct single subjectivities. These forms of media also allow for new methodological opportunities to explore intersections between representation and individual subjectivities, working as sites of both self-expression *and* spectatorship (Chouliaraki, 2012), although access remains an issue. More broadly, I believe it is important to continually monitor the media landscape to consider where there may be the persistence or re-emergence of lingering regulatory and historical tropes of single femininity, but also where there may be transformations.

I was interested to note that, during the interviews, many of the women who were not originally from a large metropolitan area, or from Western countries, often mentioned a disjuncture between their experiences of singledom there and their experiences in London. This therefore opens up future questions surrounding how such discourses are experienced by women who are not living in large, metropolitan areas or in the West, as there is little literature on this. It would also have been helpful to interview more women from older age categories, as the sample was mainly made up of younger or mid-life women. As explored in the analysis, older age is a particularly significant intersection which is largely absent in media representations, and this would have opened up important questions as to how older singledom is experienced. Yet, as discussed in the methodology and empirical chapters, the significant stigma which single women are subjected to in contemporary society perhaps leads to less of them being willing to come forward.

To conclude, the single women I spoke to negotiated and invested in cultural fantasies of singledom in deeply complex, largely ambivalent, but often very painful ways. And while such pain at times stemmed from their singledom, more often it arose from the ways that they were positioned and 'undone' by cultural fantasies of singledom, or intersubjectively by those around them. Yet despite the disciplinary

power of the discourses I have identified, the women I met, often through great effort, negotiated, resisted and transformed these gendered structures of power in a variety of ways. Within stories of great sadness, I found that there were highly transformatory moments where they presented me with deeply fulfilling, alternative fantasies of single femininity. Yet I believe that the processes of stigmatisation and abjectification identified here make it ever more important that single women's voices are heard. Feminist scholarship and feminism as a whole – which has often ignored single women – must as a consequence continue to focus on how the intersection of femininity and singledom affects women's psychic lives and everyday experiences. Indeed, in the context of growing numbers of single women, and the widening of social inequalities on multiple levels, it becomes of vital importance to investigate how our collective understandings limit what constitutes 'legitimate' ways of being in the world and who is allowed, or not, to 'have "a life" that adds up to something,' (Berlant, 2008, p. 7).

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## **APPENDICES**

### **Appendix 1 Interview topic guide**

#### **Preliminary points:**

Run through the consent and information form again. Retrieve signed hard copy and give one copy to them to keep.

Explain the interview process:

- will last approximately an hour
- they do not have to answer any questions they don't want to, or can go back to questions, ask for clarification of questions not understood
- they have the right to withdraw from the study at any point
- reconfirm strict confidentiality and data protection rules

Ask if it is ok if I take notes

Introduction of my position as researcher and personal details [say single if they ask my status]

#### **Warm-up questions:**

Do you have any questions at this stage?

How long have you lived in London?

Can I just double check your age?

[If applicable] How long have you been single?

Can you tell me a bit about your relationship history?

#### **THEME: IDENTIFICATION**

**1. If you had to describe yourself in a few words what would you say?**

[IF THEY MENTION BEING SINGLE:]

**2. Do you feel like being single is a big part of your identity?**

**3. What does being single mean to you?**

**4. How do you feel about being single?**

#### **THEME: TEMPORALITY**

**5. Have your feelings about being single changed over time? How?**

[IF PREVIOUSLY NOT SINGLE:]

**6. When you described yourself before, you said you felt like xxxxxx, do you feel this is different to how you describe yourself when you're not single? If so, how?**

**7. How do you imagine yourself in the future?**

[IF THEY INDICATE ANY FUTURE CHANGES:]

**8. Is being single something that you are hoping might change?**

**9. [IF YES] Why do you see yourself in a different situation from where you are now?**

**10. How would you imagine your future in an ideal world?**

**THEME: INTERSUBJECTIVE REGULATION AND TEMPORALITY**

**11. What do your family and friends think about you being single?**

**12. Has this changed over time?**

**13. Have others ever seen you in a way in which you don't see yourself? [If so] How?**

**14. Have your friends or family ever tried to encourage you not to be single? How did this make you feel?**

**THEME: MEDIA [WHEN MEDIA COMES UP:]**

**15. What do you think about the portrayal of single women in films or TV? Can you think of any examples?**

**16. Are there any examples of single women in the media can you relate to? What is it about them that makes them relatable? How does this make you feel?**

[IF IT COMES UP THAT EXPERIENCES OF BEING SINGLE ARE DIFFERENT TO WHAT IS IN THE MEDIA:]

**17. What is missing? How does this make you feel?**

**Closing questions:**

**Is there anything else we haven't touched on that you would like to share?**

**Is there anything you would like to go back to?**

**Confirm consent still given, whether I can follow up with any further questions later.**

**Confirm that they can contact me if they have any further questions later.**

**Ask if there is anyone else they would like to refer.**

## Appendix 2 Interviewee Information Sheet and Consent Form



### Title of research project: Single women's experiences

Kate Gilchrist

PhD Researcher, Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science

### Information for participants

Thank you for considering participating in this study which I am carrying out for my PhD at the London School of Economics and Political Science, and which is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. This information sheet outlines the purpose of the study and provides a description of your involvement and rights as a participant, if you agree to take part.

#### 1. What is the research about?

My PhD thesis is looking at the relationship between women's identity and being single. It will involve interviewing 30 women living in London about their experiences of being single. Findings will be published in my PhD thesis.

#### 2. What will my involvement be?

It will involve meeting me for around one hour at a location in London which is most convenient for you.

#### 3. Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part I will ask you to sign a consent form which I will send you in advance for you to read and consider in your own time and you can sign it when we meet up.

#### 4. What will my information be used for?

I will use the information for my PhD thesis, which will also be published, as well as potentially republished in future research. Data may be shared with other academics for research and non-commercial purposes, but no confidential data will ever be shared. The data will also be stored in a secure archive, for potential future, restricted access.

#### 5. How do I withdraw from the study?

You can withdraw at any point of the study, without having to give a reason. Although I don't foresee any problems you do not have to answer any question you don't want to, and you can withdraw from the interview at any time for any reason. If you withdraw I will not keep the information you have given so far, unless you are happy for me to do so.

#### 6. Will my taking part and my data be kept fully confidential?

Your data will be made fully confidential which means that your personal details will not be used in any reports, analysis or publications resulting from the study, and no quotes will be traceable. All files, transcripts and summaries will be anonymised and stored in password-protected/locked devices and encrypted folders. Files containing your personal details will be deleted after the research is completed.

#### 7. What happens after the interview?

You are free to contact me at any point after the interview if you have any further questions/comments/concerns. I am happy to show you a copy of the completed thesis, in PDF format, once published, on request.

#### 8. What if I have a question or complaints?

If you have any questions regarding this study please contact me on [k.r.gilchrist@lse.ac.uk](mailto:k.r.gilchrist@lse.ac.uk)

If you have any concerns or complaints regarding the conduct of this research, please contact the LSE Research Governance Manager via [research.ethics@lse.ac.uk](mailto:research.ethics@lse.ac.uk).

To request a copy of the data held about you please contact: [glpd.info.rights@lse.ac.uk](mailto:glpd.info.rights@lse.ac.uk) If you are happy to take part in this study, please sign the consent sheet attached.



## CONSENT FORM

### Single women's experiences

**Name of researcher:**

Kate Gilchrist

**PARTICIPATION IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY IS VOLUNTARY.**

I agree to taking part in the study	YES / NO
I understand that I am free to decline to participate in this research study, or I may withdraw my participation at any point without penalty. My decision whether or not to participate in this research study will have no negative impacts on me either personally or professionally.	YES / NO
I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet provided for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask any questions I have.	YES / NO
I understand that my data will be made confidential which means that identifying information such as my name or address will not be used in any data, reports, analysis or publications resulting from the study. All digital files, transcripts and summaries will be given codes in order to identify them and stored separately from any names or other direct identification of participants. The files will be stored in password-protected devices and encrypted folders. Any hard copies of research information will be kept in locked files at all times. Any files containing direct identification of participants will be deleted after the research is completed.	YES / NO
I understand the data generated and the final written thesis may be shared with other academics for research and non-commercial purposes in future, but no confidential data will ever be shared. The research will also be stored in a secure archive via the UK Data Service for potential future restricted access.	YES / NO
I agree to the interview being audio recorded and for additional notes to be taken during the interview.	YES / NO

You are free to contact me at any point after the interview if you have any further questions/comments. I am happy to show you a copy of the completed thesis, in PDF format, once published, on request.

Please retain a copy of this consent form.

Participant name:

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer name:

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

For more information please contact me at any time on: [k.r.gilchrist@lse.ac.uk](mailto:k.r.gilchrist@lse.ac.uk)

### Appendix 3 Interviewees' characteristics and interview location

Interview No.	Age	Race	Class	Sexuality	Interview location
1	36	White	Middle	Queer	Bar
2	39	White	Middle	Straight	Cafe
3	33	White	Middle	Straight	Home
4	36	White	Middle	Straight	Bar
5	33	White	Middle	Straight	Work
6	39	White	Middle	Straight	Home
7	33	White	Middle	Straight	Work
8	37	White	Middle	Straight	Home
9	32	White	Working	Straight	Cafe
10	30	White	Middle	Straight	Cafe
11	42	White	Middle	Straight	Cafe
12	22	SE Asian	Middle	Straight	Cafe
13	36	SE Asian	Middle	Straight	Home
14	21	White	Middle	Lesbian	LSE
15	24	White	Middle	Bisexual	LSE
16	25	Latin American	Middle	Lesbian	LSE
17	66	White	Middle	Asexual	Work
18	50	White	Middle	Straight	Café
19	47	Black	Working	Straight	Cafe
20	30	SE Asian	Middle	Bisexual	Café
21	28	White	Middle	Bisexual	Cafe
22	39	White	Working	Straight	Cafe
23	47	White	Middle	Straight	Cafe
24	41	White	Middle	Straight	Cafe
25	50	Black	Middle	Straight	Cafe

## **Appendix 4 Codebook**

### **Theme: Intersectionality**

Code label:

#### **Age**

Short definition:

Reference or implied reference to single characters' age or to age in general, particularly broader stereotypes in relation to singledom.

Full definition:

Identify where age is used to categorise a single person/singleness in a particular, intersection or hierachising way. In particular with sexuality, asexuality or hypersexuality.

When to use:

Use when age is being evoked only in reference to relationship status, particularly sexuality. For example: "I cannot be considered attractive now that I'm this age", or where sexuality is overemphasized according to age.

Code label:

#### **Race**

Short definition:

Reference or implied reference to characters' race or ethnicity to racial hierarchisations in general.

Full definition:

Identify where race or ethnicity is used to categorise a single person/singleness in a particular, intersectional way. In particular in relation to linking themes/codes of hypersexuality and deviancy or disassociations with other themes.

Code label:

#### **Class**

Short definition:

Reference or implied reference to characters' class or to class hierarchisations in general.

Full definition:

Identify where class is used to categorise a single person/singleness in a particular, intersectional way. In particular in relation to linking working class to themes/codes of hypersexuality and deviancy or disassociations with other themes.

Code label:

#### **Disability**

Short definition:

Reference or implied reference to characters' disability or to disability/ableness in general.

Full definition:

Identify where disability is used to categorise a single person/singleness in a particular, intersectional way.

Code label:

#### **Embodiment**

Short definition:

Any categorization that addresses a person's physicality, be that size, shape, deportment in a way that relates to their singleness.

When to use:

Use for instances where embodiment is used to 'other'. But it can also be used in relation to sexualisation – eg, what form of embodiment is positioned as attractive/sexual? May also relate in particular in connection to disability and age.

Code label:

#### **Religion**

Short definition:

Any reference to specific religions, or religion/belief in general, including religious figures and motifs or systems of spiritual belief.

Code label:

**Heteronormativity**

Short definition:

Any reference where heterosexual orientation is implicit or directly constructed as the 'norm'.

Code label:

**Sexuality**

Short definition:

Any reference to sexual orientation, including heterosexuality.

Full definition:

Any reference to sexual orientation, including heterosexuality, however it should be noted that the main focus is on sexual minorities and heterosexuality should only be coded where it is significant, or intersected with another category.

Do not use:

For asexuality which has its own code and allows this to be analysed separately. Similarly do not confuse with heteronormativity.

**Theme: Historical Tropes**

Code label:

**Chastity**

Short definition:

Reference to an abstention from sexual activity.

Full definition:

Reference to or associations with abstention from sexual activity whether chosen or circumstantial, as well as chaste attitudes or responses to such attitudes.

When to use:

Particularly note when this occurs in relation to religion, race and age.

When not to use:

Don't confuse with Asexuality or Unattractiveness, although these in particular may occur alongside or in connection to this code.

Code label:

**Asexuality**

Short definition:

Absence of desire for sex or a romantic relationship/associations with such an absence.

Full definition:

Absence of desire for sex or a romantic relationship.

When to use:

Note can be either absence of desire for sex or romantic relationship and these categories are not mutually exclusive. Particularly intersections with religion.

When not to use:

Do not confuse with Unattractiveness or Chastity although these in particular may occur alongside or in connection to this code.

Code label:

**Deviancy**

Short definition:

Any behaviour or attitude which is seen as breaking social rules of conduct

Long definition:

Promiscuity; criminality; dishonesty; drug taking, agent of societal breakdown; immorality

Use:

Particularly in relation to race, sexuality and hypersexuality. Very important that this is not always a negative association / theme.

Code label:

**Emotional Dysfunction**

Short definition:

Non-romantic, non-sexual, or imaginary relationships, over-independence as mental ill health.

Long definition:

Non-romantic, non-sexual, caring or imaginary relationships as abnormal, overly intense, unnatural or immoral/perverse.

Use:

This may occur particularly in relation to friends, children, family members and pets etc and intersect with social isolation.

Don't use:

Don't confuse with mental instability although there may be some overlap.

Code label:

**Social isolation**

Short definition:

Association with loneliness/ lack of social contact

Long definition:

Specifically relates to isolation in a negative sense (use Over Independence for detachment which does not induce loneliness/negativity in a subject), so self isolation/isolation by others or general social isolation.

Code label:

**Social dysfunction**

Short definition:

An inability to connect in a social situation or pick up on social cues/engage in appropriate social behaviour [can be connected to social isolation but not *always* leading to this].

Code label:

**Immaturity**

Short definition:

Stigmatising references/associations with lack of development or stunted growth.

Use:

Particularly in relation to age, sexuality, religion.

Code label:

**Mental instability**

Short definition:

Stigmatising references/association with irrationality, 'craziness', neurosis, abnormality of mind, sexual frigidity/repression and frustration, and desperation.

Do not use:

Avoid confusion with dysfunction, although there may be some overlap.

Code label:

**Unattractiveness**

Long definition:

Any depiction which presents someone as not confirming to norms of sexual attractiveness in any way or displaying behaviour which is explicitly presented as not sexually attractive.

Use:

May often occur *alongside* virginity, chastity and asexuality but not exclusively so.

Do not use:

Don't confuse with virginity, chastity and asexuality.

Code label:

**Professionalisation**

Short definition:

References to careers/vocations as opposed to simply employment

Use:

Strong intersections with class.

Code label:

**Virginity**

Short definition:

Someone who hasn't had full heteronormative sex.

Full definition:

Someone who hasn't had full heteronormative sex, whether through choice or not.

Use:

Particularly intersections with religion and/or notions of purity, especially intersected with race/racial purity. Also with heteronormativity/sexuality.

Do not:

confuse with asexuality/unattractiveness/chastity

Code Label:

**Vulnerability**

Short definition:

Primarily in relationship to economic and physical vulnerability and inability/overexposure to risk.

But also legal and moral vulnerability (to corruption) or emotional.

Code label:

**(Hyper)sexualisation**

Short definition:

Any reference or link to intense, glamourizing, sexual objectification of single femininity.

Use:

Particularly as it intersects with race, sexuality and age.

Do not:

Confuse with Sexually desiring subject or promiscuity although there may be overlap.

Code Label:

**Agency as a shift towards the entrepreneurial self**

Short definition:

Ability/potential to exercise control over actions, as well as an absence of this.

Use: Distinguish from choice, although there may be overlap.

Code Label:

**Choice as a shift towards entrepreneurialism**

Short definition:

Existence/availability of a choice as a *form* of agency, though not necessarily taken, as well as absence of choice.

Long definition:

Existence/availability of a choice as a form of agency, though not necessarily taken. Also includes neoliberal understanding, such as references to a compulsion to choose, self-responsibility for choices made or critiques of choices. May be overlap with self-surveillance/accountability and empowerment.

Use for:

Choice as a form agency or lack of; instrumentalisation of choice as a critique, for example being too choosy as a reason for singleness.

Code Label:

**Desiring sexual subject**

Short definition:

Actively desiring/sexual feelings for another, or more generally an expression of sexual desire. Beware of overlap with sexual autonomy, which is more about a purposefully resistant sexuality.

Code label:

**Individualisation**

Short definition:

Any reference which works to privilege the individual self/autonomy and independence over collective/community relations and identities, either explicitly or by inference.

Use:

Should be distinguished from social isolation – social isolation could be a perceived/supposed effect of individualization, rather than coded as individualization. May include positive references to independence.

Code label:

**Over independence**

Short definition:

Unhealthy detachment strongly overlaps with Individualisation.

Long definition:

Detachment from others as unhealthy and excessive; too independent or autonomous; cold; uncaring.

Use:

Don't confuse detachment/independence from others with social isolation – this code relates to active detachment or autonomy rather than unwanted isolation. Use this for detachment which does not induce loneliness in a subject, and use social isolation for that which does.

Don't use: for positive associations with independence.

**Theme: Postfeminism**

Code label:

**Resilience**

Short definition:

A personal, individualised responsibility for handling risk and precarity, while always being pleasing and approachable.

Code label:

**Self-Accountability**

Short definition:

Self-responsibility for own situation/actions and/or positioning.

Code label:

**Self-empowerment**

Short definition:

Where action/situation is perceived as improving personal growth or strength, or independence.

Code label:

**Self surveillance**

Short definition:

The intense monitoring of own behaviour, thoughts and feelings.

Use:

Strong overlaps with self-accountability/self-transformation and regulation.

Code label:

**Intersubjective regulation**

Short definition:



Where others monitor and control a single person at the psychic, behavioural or physical level.

Code label:

**Self regulation**

Short definition:

Awareness of or attention to own behaviour, thoughts and physicality. Strong overlap with self-transformation, but omits a specific direction in its desired purpose/desirable state.

Code label:

**Self transformation:**

Short definition:

The monitoring of own behaviour, thoughts and feelings in an effort to change at the psychic, behavioural or physical level to produce certain desirable effects or a particular desirable state.

Code label:

**Resistance**

Short definition:

Moments of active countering of social norms/regulation of single femininity, not just at an individual level but also collectively.

Use:

Beware of overlap with self-empowerment.

Code label:

**Sexual autonomy**

Short definition:

Where the figure uses sexual agency, desire and activity as a way of countering social norms and regulation of single femininity, not just at an individual level but collectively.

Use:

Beware of overlap with desiring sexual subject.

**Theme: Fantasy**

Code label:

**Metaphor**

Short definition:

Where there is a desire to become/replace another.

Code label:

**Temporality**

Short definition:

A reordering of past, present and future, a return to the past, or construction of a future.

**Thematic mapping**

**GLOBAL THEME:**

HISTORICAL TROPES

**Organising theme:**

Mental health

**Basic themes:**

Emotional dysfunction

Social isolation

Mental instability

Immaturity

Deviancy

Emotional Vulnerability

**Organising theme:**

Sexuality

**Basic themes:**

Unattractiveness

Virginity

Chastity

Asexuality

Moral Vulnerability

**Organising theme:**

Economic

**Basic themes:**

Professionalisation

Economic Vulnerability

**GLOBAL THEME:**

POSTFEMINISM

**Organising theme:**

Sexuality

**Basic themes:**

Hypersexualisation

Desiring sexual subject

**Organising theme:**

The self

**Basic themes:**

Self-empowerment

Self-accountability

Individualisation

Self-surveillance

Over independence

**Organising theme:**

Agency

**Basic themes:**

Choice

**GLOBAL THEME:**

INTERSECTIONALITY

**Basic themes:**

Embodiment

Race

Class

Sexuality

Age

Religion

Heteronormativity

**GLOBAL THEME:**

TECHNOLOGIES OF THE SELF

**Organising theme:**

Intersubjective regulation

**Organising theme:**

The self

**Basic themes:**

Self-transformation

Self-regulation

**GLOBAL THEME:**

FANTASY

**Basic themes:**

Metaphor

Temporality

**GLOBAL THEME:**

RESISTANCE

**Basic themes:**

Individual

Collective